WWII

ARDENNES OFFENSIVE HITLER'S LAST HOPES WERE DASHED

Bringing History to Life

80 YEARS
The Fall of Berlin and final Nazi surrender

THE BATTLE FOR MONTE CASSINO

German resistance on the mountain top cost the Allies dear

BERLIN WAITED FOR DOOMSDAY

Hitler demanded a fight to the last drop of blood

SENIOR NAZIS FOUGHT FOR POWER

Göring, Himmler and Bormann squabbled over the ruins

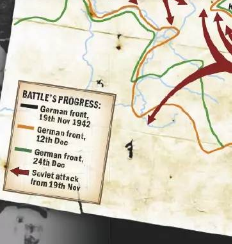
The ENDGAME

THE RED ARMY WAS THWARTED

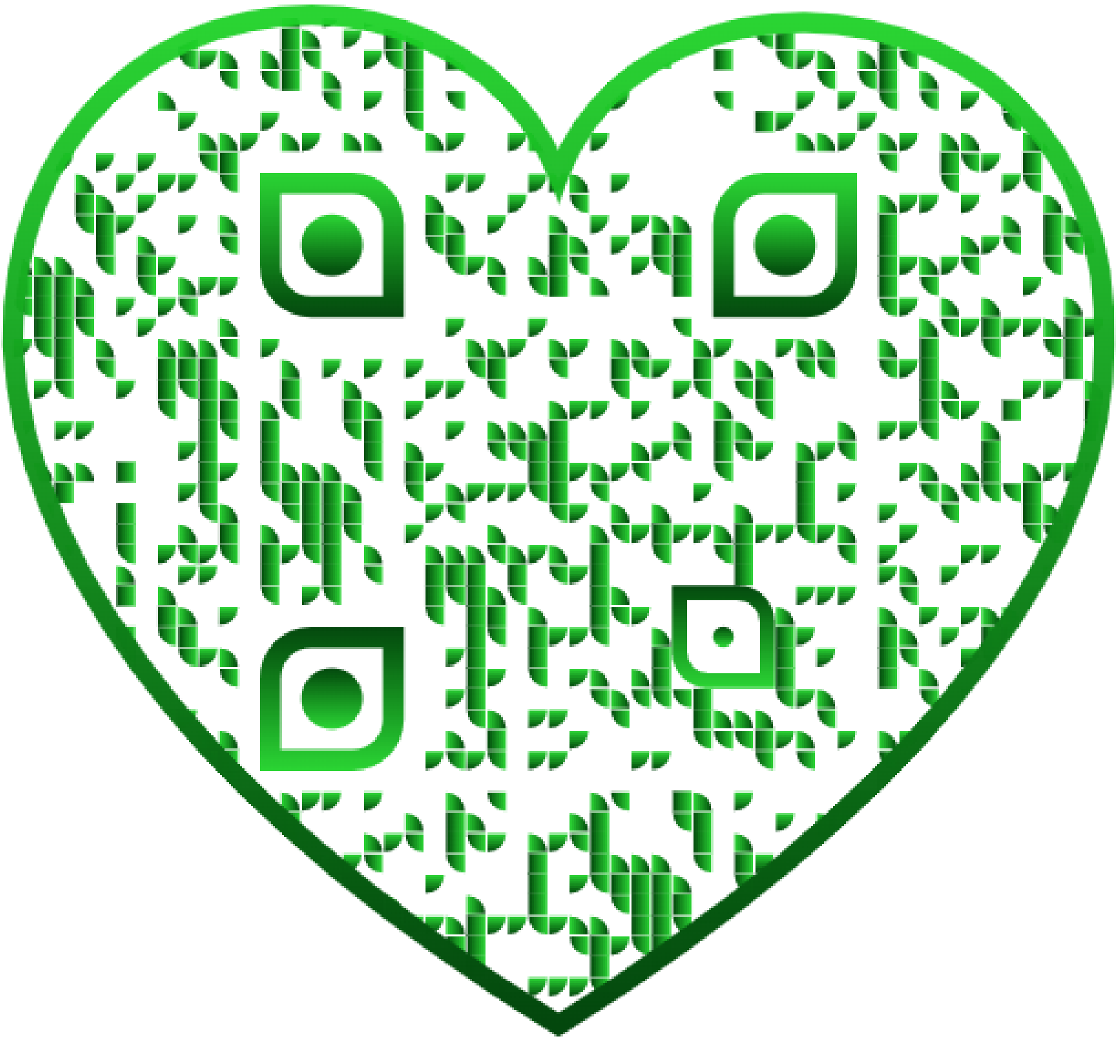
Seelower Höhen provided unexpected resistance – but Berlin still fell a week later

HITLERS 10 BIGGEST BLUNDERS

Führer was a lousy military strategist


BATTLE'S PROGRESS:
German front, 19th Nov 1942
German front, 12th Dec
German front, 24th Dec
Soviet attack from 19th Nov

£9.99
9 772445 166501 4 98



THE ROAD TO THE END FOR NAZI GERMANY

In 1944, the Nazi leadership realised that the war was lost. One by one, the last bastions fell and Italy surrendered to the Allies. Hitler stood alone against the superpower and his last major offensive in the Ardennes ended in disaster. The Allied armies crossed the borders of the Third Reich from the east and west and approached Berlin in leaps and bounds. While everyone around him tried to save what could be saved, Hitler refused to face reality. Instead, he ordered a fight to the death, and young boys and old men were hastily armed and assigned to the defence of Berlin. The Führer himself hid under thick layers of concrete in the bunker in the centre of the capital. Here, he commited suicide together with his wife Eva Braun on 30th April 1945. All these stories and more feature in this special issue marking Nazi Germany's Endgame.

Enjoy the issue.

Contents

6 The Allies paid dearly for Monte Cassino

14 D-DAY: History's greatest logistical puzzle

26 Montgomery required a bridge too far from his men

34 Hitler's last hope was dashed at Bastogne

44 Berlin waited for Doomsday

54 400,000 firebombs turn Dresden into a fiery hell

62 Rag-tag army held up Stalin

74 Adolf Hitler must face disaster: "The war is lost"

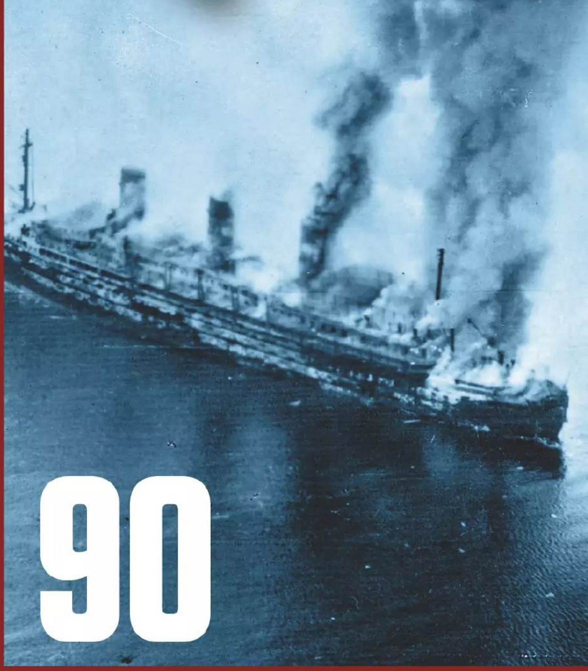
82 Top Nazis vied over ruined Germany

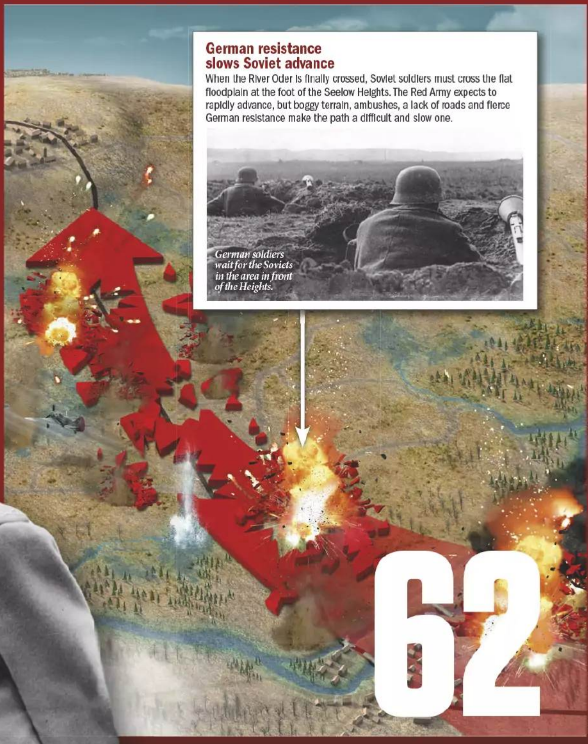
90 SS kept hold of camp prisoners for as long as possible

100 Germany was cut in half

106 Hitler's heirs had to save Germany

116 Hitler's 10 biggest blunders



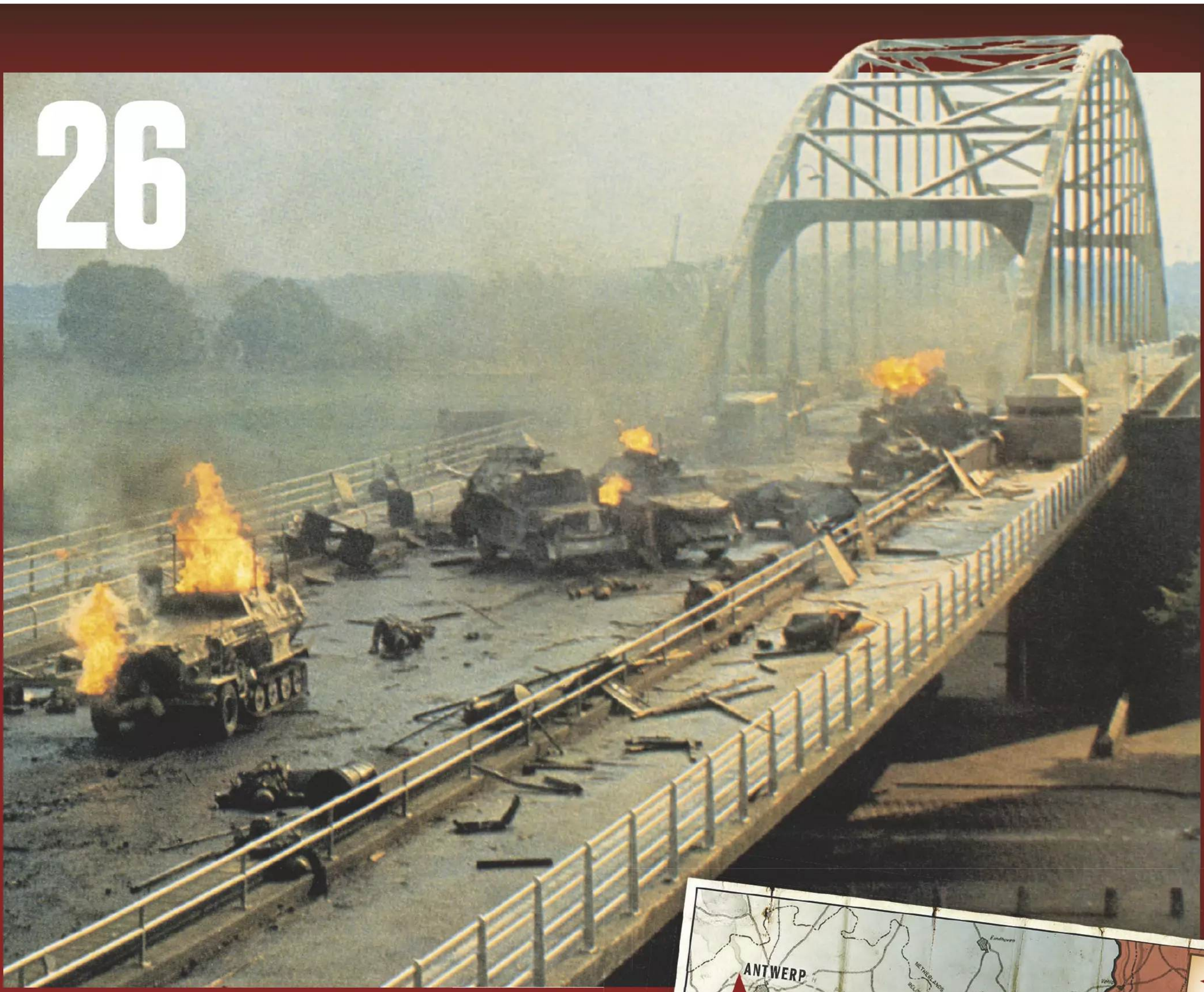


German resistance slows Soviet advance

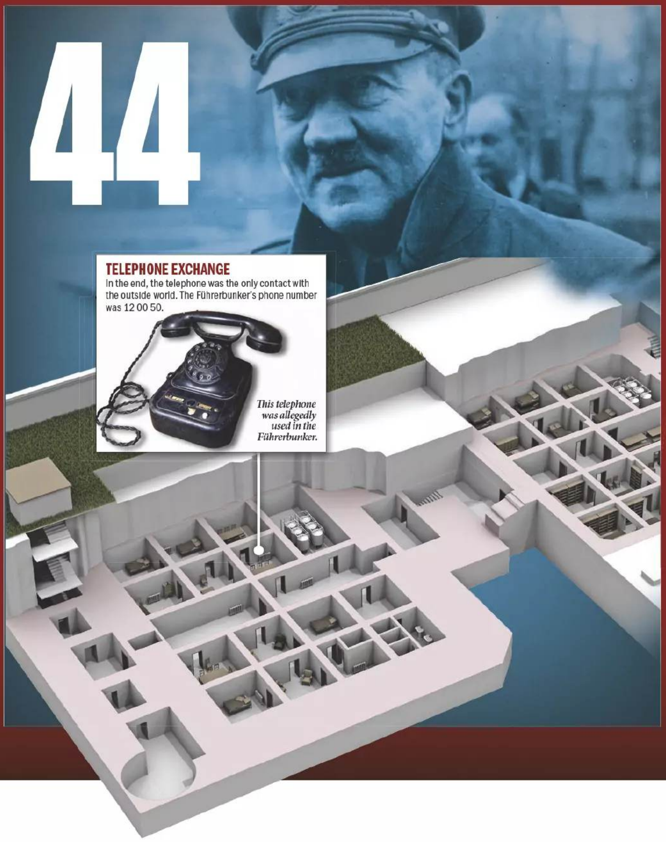
When the River Oder is finally crossed, Soviet soldiers must cross the flat floodplain at the foot of the Seelow Heights. The Red Army expects to rapidly advance, but boggy terrain, ambushes, a lack of roads and fierce German resistance make the path a difficult and slow one.

German soldiers wait for the Soviets in the area in front of the Heights.

26

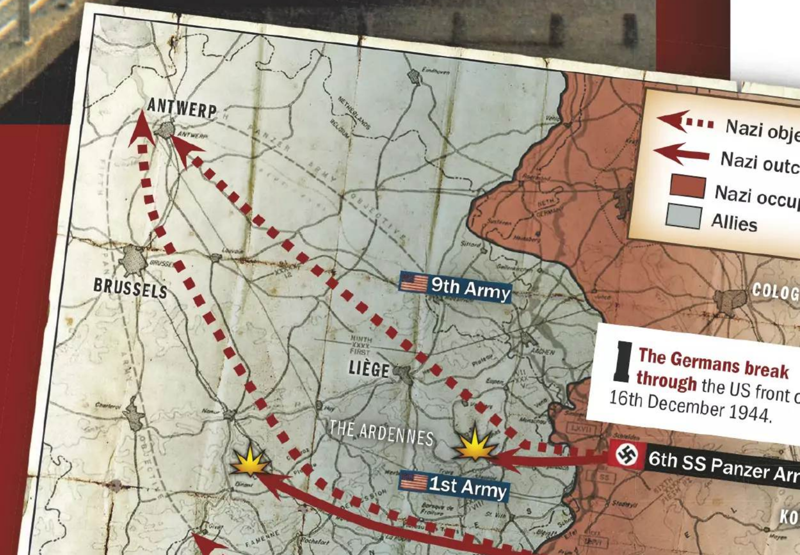


44



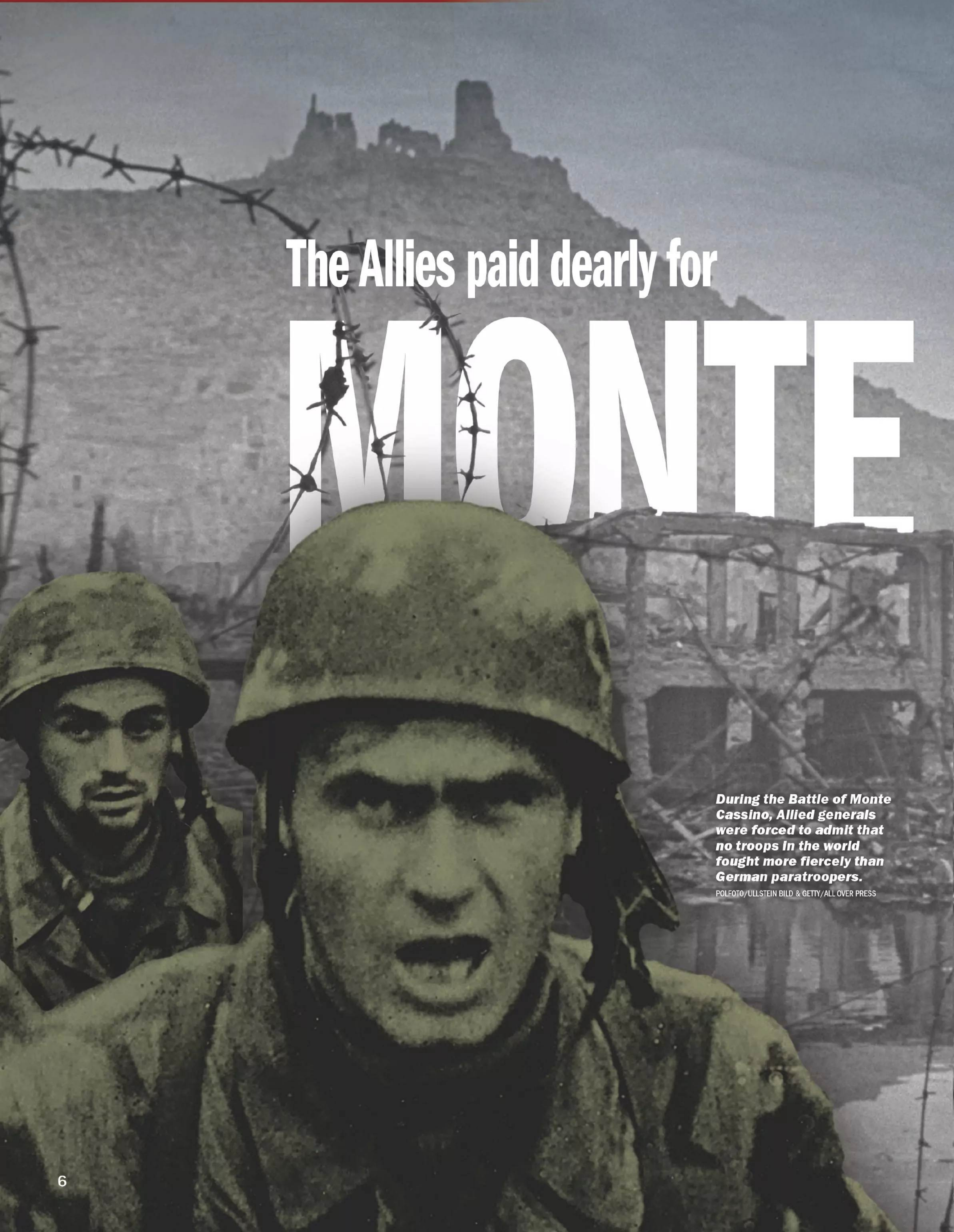
TELEPHONE EXCHANGE
In the end, the telephone was the only contact with the outside world. The Führerbunker's phone number was 12 00 50.

This telephone was allegedly used in the Führerbunker.


Nazi obje
Nazi outc
Nazi occup
Allies
ANTWERP
BRUSSELS
LIÈGE
THE ARDENNES
BASTOGNE
COLOG
KO
9th Army
1st Army
3rd Army
6th SS Panzer Arm
5th Panzer Army
7th Army

1 **The Germans break through** the US front o
16th December 1944.

34



The Allies paid dearly for MONTE

During the Battle of Monte Cassino, Allied generals were forced to admit that no troops in the world fought more fiercely than German paratroopers.

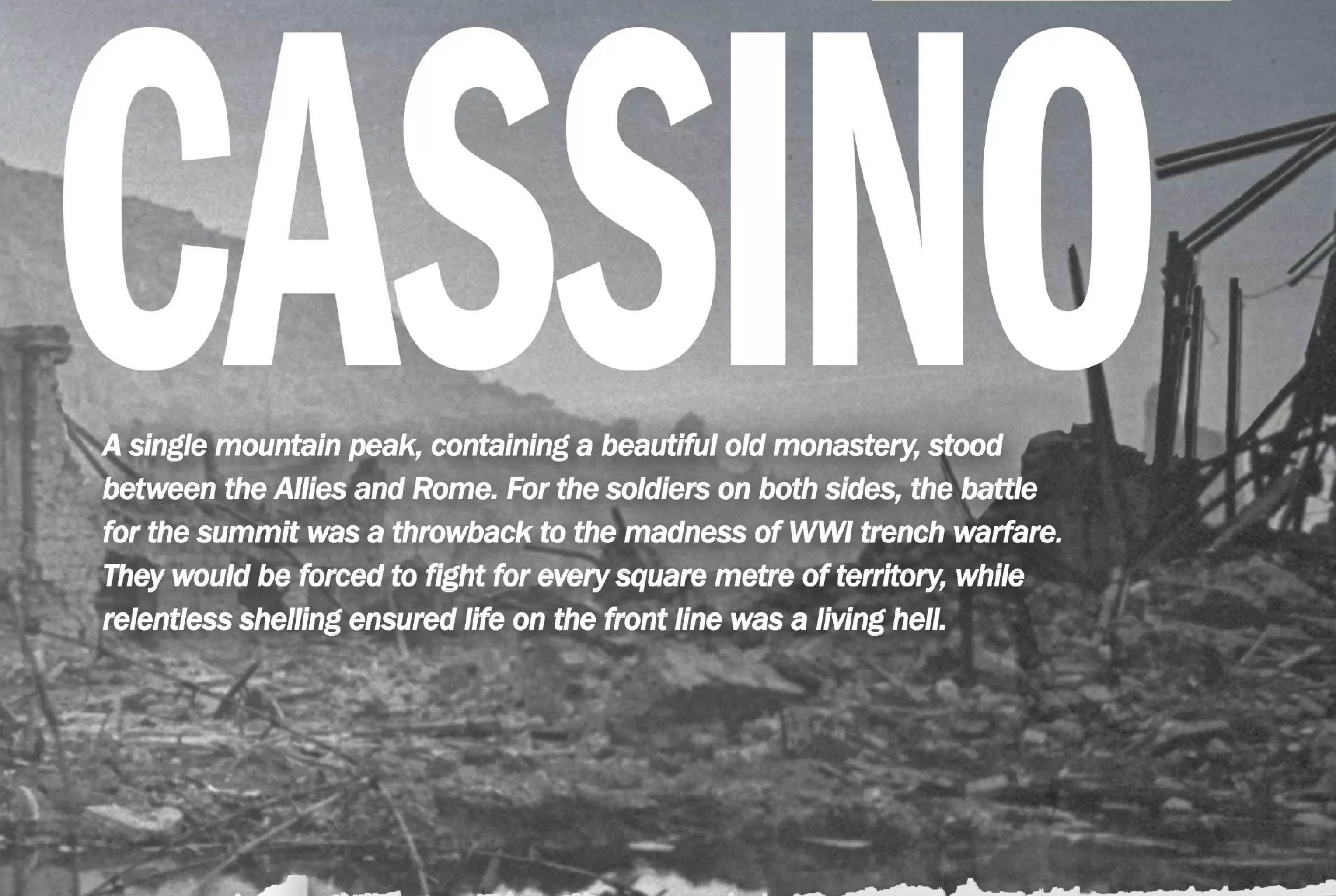
POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD & GETTY/ALL OVER PRESS

ITALY/1944

ITALY
ROME
CASSINO

As the Germans retreat on the Eastern Front, the Allies invade southern Italy and overthrow Mussolini's fascist regime. But the Allied forces' march north through the Italian peninsula soon meets stubborn resistance.

CASSINO



A single mountain peak, containing a beautiful old monastery, stood between the Allies and Rome. For the soldiers on both sides, the battle for the summit was a throwback to the madness of WWI trench warfare. They would be forced to fight for every square metre of territory, while relentless shelling ensured life on the front line was a living hell.

A global army

The Allied forces in Italy were a patchwork of nationalities. All were thrown into the bloody battle of Monte Cassino.

France's Moroccan mountain troops had a reputation for murderous efficiency with knives.

GERMANS FEARED THE NORTH AFRICANS

Of all Allied troops in Italy, the Germans had the greatest respect for those from France's North African colonies. French officers had learned that if they took the lead, their Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian privates would follow, regardless of cost. The men fought fiercely and endured hardship but were also brutal towards PoWs and civilians.

GETTY IMAGES

BY RASMUS DAHLBERG & ESBEN MØNSTER-KJÆR

The evening was cold and dull as usual for the German sentries on the slopes outside the city of Cassino, in central Italy. But the quiet was suddenly broken. Without warning, the mountainside filled with roaring figures storming forward. Higher up, dazed defenders frantically tried to regroup, but it was too late.

On the night of 12th January 1944, Moroccan colonial soldiers from the French Army quickly overran the German outposts. The fearless North African troops were in their element among the peaks.

"The Moroccan loves the night and the mountains," wrote Colonel Felix Lappara. "Rocks, thickets and sheer crevasses, all observed in the treacherous darkness, are his best allies and over a thousand years his eyes have become accustomed to not losing their way in the gloom. He knows when to creep forward and when to wait."

An entire Moroccan division was advancing through the Apennines, which ran the length of the Italian peninsula from north to south. Algerian soldiers also fought alongside the Moroccans, and despite the hostile landscape, they advanced rapidly. Once again, France's North African soldiers proved why they were considered to be among the world's best assault troops.

Soon after, the Germans deployed their own specialists: paratroopers, trained to fight in difficult terrain. The advance grew more arduous, and the Moroccans and Algerians had to fight with hand grenades and bayonets to capture every peak.

"It was no longer even a question of small-unit combat, but rather of one man against another in a terrain in which one could spend hours on end without having any clear idea of what was happening only ten yards from the forward positions," read a report from the Moroccan division.

The battle continued after dawn, and over the following days, the North Africans fought hard to move forward. Despite their efforts, the offensive only advanced the front by five kilometres. And the Allies had only managed to reach the German defensive position: the Gustav Line.

Geography was the biggest enemy

The slow progress was nothing new in the protracted Italian campaign. Ever since September 1943, when troops from the United States, British Empire and French colonies had landed in southern Italy, the Allies had been slowly moving north. The Germans had blown up all the bridges over gorges and destroyed river crossings. The narrow roads were blocked by mines, and from the ridges, hidden guns, mortars, and machine guns inflicted constant losses.

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring had promised Hitler that he could defend Rome until the summer of 1944, so he prepared the Gustav Line – a belt of positions from coast to coast, designed to bring the enemy's offensive to a halt.

The location of the Gustav Line had been chosen with care, because almost the entire width of Italy was covered in mountains at that point. The Liri Valley was the only place where Allied tanks could advance. First, however, they had to cross the Rapido River, and every metre of it was watched from the peaks behind the city of Cassino. From here, the Germans could direct deadly gunfire at the only usable road heading north.

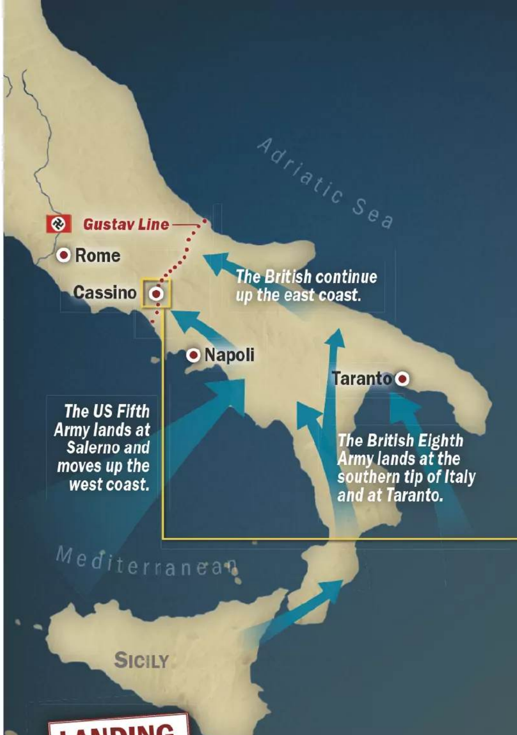
Supreme Allied Commander Harold Alexander was aware of this, writing that "the road which leads to Rome is long and bristles with thorns". So, instead of breaking through the Gustav Line, Alexander laid out an ambitious plan that would make an attack on the ▶

Sikhs in the British Army refused to replace their turbans with steel helmets.

INDIANS WEREN'T TRUSTED

Soldiers from the British Indian Army fought on all fronts in World War II, and three divisions were deployed to Italy. But after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British were suspicious of their Indian 'sepoys', so each division included British units along with Gurkhas – hardy Nepalese mountain folk whose loyalty was beyond doubt.

GETTY/ALL OVER PRESS



The British continue up the east coast.

The US Fifth Army lands at Salerno and moves up the west coast.

The British Eighth Army lands at the southern tip of Italy and at Taranto.

LANDING

The Allies cross to the mainland

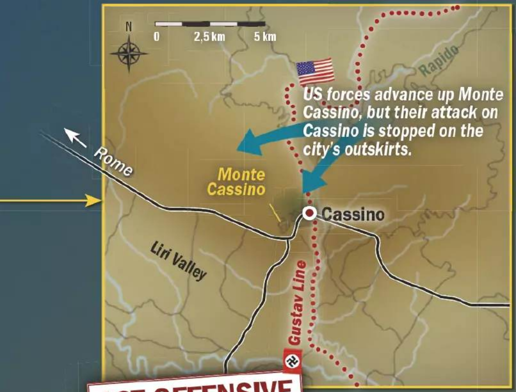
In the summer of 1943, Allied forces occupy Sicily, and on 3rd September they land in southern Italy. Mussolini's fascist regime swiftly collapses, but the Germans continue to fight on their own, and halt the Allies at the Gustav Line.

An uphill trek. Polish soldiers climb the steep slopes of Monte Cassino, while the Germans have a clear view from the top.

SCALA/BPK & OSPREY

The Allies crept north

Churchill described Italy as Europe's "soft underbelly". He wanted to take Mussolini out of the war, but US leaders favoured tackling Hitler directly via an invasion of France. The stubborn Prime Minister got his wish, but the campaign became a drawn-out affair that the US deeply regretted.

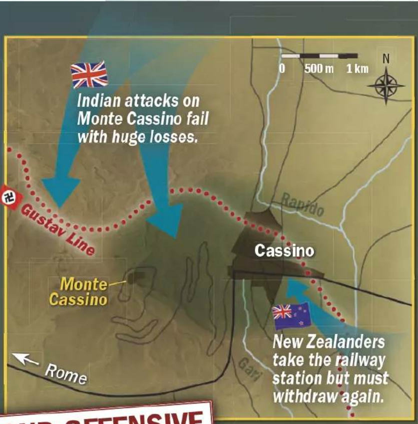

N
0
2,5 km
5 km
Rapido
US forces advance up Monte Cassino, but their attack on Cassino is stopped on the city's outskirts.
Rome
Monte Cassino
Cassino
Liri Valley
Gustav Line

1ST OFFENSIVE

US troops brought to a standstill

On 22nd January, a US division tries to take Cassino and Monte Cassino in one combined attack. Lack of numbers force the Germans to retreat to the slopes above the city, but US soldiers can't reach the summit before their offensive stalls on 4th February.

Allied losses: 2,500 men.

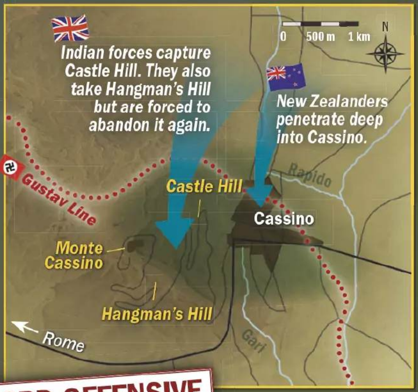

0
500 m
1 km
N
Indian attacks on Monte Cassino fail with huge losses.
Gustav Line
Rapido
Cassino
Monte Cassino
New Zealanders take the railway station but must withdraw again.
Rome
Gari

2ND OFFENSIVE

British imperial forces step in

Battle-hardened divisions from New Zealand and India advance on 17th February, but the Germans repel all attacks along Monte Cassino's narrow paths, while down in the city the Allies are unable to bring tanks over the Rapido. The offensive halts with no gains.

Allied losses: 1,000 men.


0
500 m
1 km
N
Indian forces capture Castle Hill. They also take Hangman's Hill but are forced to abandon it again.
New Zealanders penetrate deep into Cassino.
Gustav Line
Castle Hill
Rapido
Cassino
Monte Cassino
Hangman's Hill
Rome
Gari

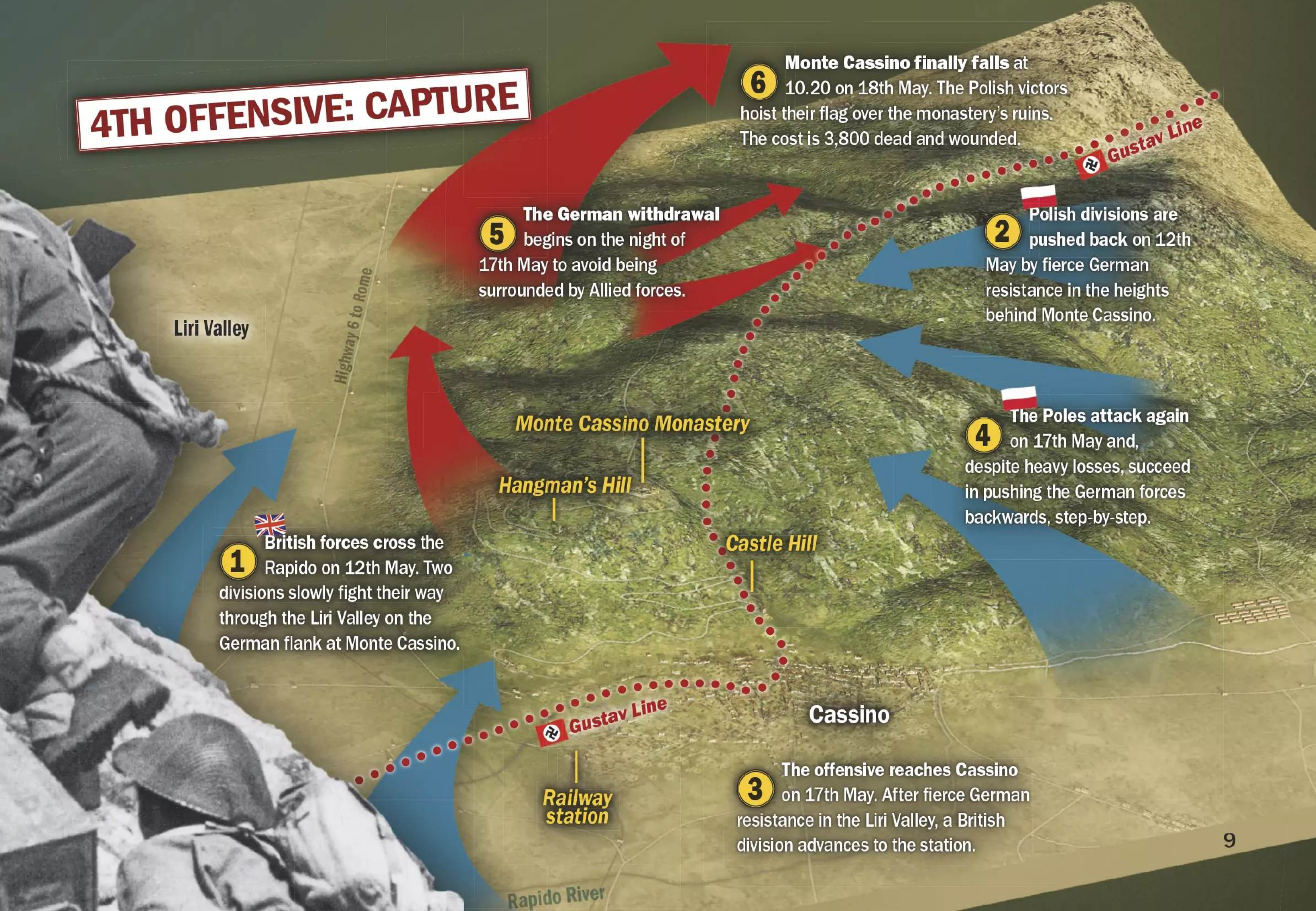
3RD OFFENSIVE

Allies enter Cassino

Allied forces attack again on 15th March. This time, they gain a foothold in Cassino to drive a wedge between the town and Monte Cassino. But as the battle subsides on the 19th, the Germans still hold part of Cassino as well as the monastery on the summit.

Allied losses: 1,100 men.

4TH OFFENSIVE: CAPTURE


Gustav Line
Liri Valley
Highway 6 to Rome
Monte Cassino Monastery
Hangman's Hill
Castle Hill
Cassino
Gustav Line
Railway station
Rapido River

① **British forces cross the** Rapido on 12th May. Two divisions slowly fight their way through the Liri Valley on the German flank at Monte Cassino.

② **Polish divisions are pushed back** on 12th May by fierce German resistance in the heights behind Monte Cassino.

③ **The offensive reaches Cassino** on 17th May. After fierce German resistance in the Liri Valley, a British division advances to the station.

④ **The Poles attack again** on 17th May and, despite heavy losses, succeed in pushing the German forces backwards, step-by-step.

⑤ **The German withdrawal** begins on the night of 17th May to avoid being surrounded by Allied forces.

⑥ **Monte Cassino finally falls** at 10.20 on 18th May. The Polish victors hoist their flag over the monastery's ruins. The cost is 3,800 dead and wounded.

Germans' natural fortress unnecessary: by landing on the coast behind the enemy, he'd outflank the Germans on the Gustav Line.

On 22nd January 1944, boatloads of US and British soldiers streamed towards the coast at Anzio, which lay between the front line and Rome. But Kesselring's reserve units were prepared, and German elite forces quickly surrounded the bridgehead. The Allies took too long to break out, and the operation was a failure.

US forces attacked in vain

In parallel with the landing, attacks began at the mouth of the Liri Valley, but the North Africans of the Free French Forces had barely begun their offensive when they were ordered south-west to help US troops, who were trying to capture the city and mountain of Cassino.

The hardy North African soldiers weren't impressed with their allies. And they quickly discovered that the enemy's respect for the US soldiers was just as low: "German... patrols were operating all over no man's land, throwing grenades and shouting insults at us," wrote Sergeant Ahmed Ben Bella, who later became the first president of independent Algeria. "We soon realised, as the insults were all in English, that the Germans thought the Americans were still there. The Americans had hardly sent out any patrols and had not even been able to tell us where the enemy outposts were located."

At the northern edge of Cassino, a US division was trying to cross the Rapido River. But each attack was slowed down by mines and muddy riverbanks, while German machine guns kept battering away. Sergeant Major Billy Kirby described the horror: "We were under constant fire... It was the only scene that I'd seen in the war that lived up to what you see in the movies. I had never seen so many bodies – our own guys. I remember this kid being hit by a machine gun; the bullets hitting him pushed his body along like a tin-can. Just about everybody was hit. I didn't have a single good friend in the company who wasn't killed or wounded."

The Germans also suffered. A non-commissioned officer from a front-line regiment wrote in his diary: "22 January: I am done. The artillery fire is driving me crazy. I am frightened as never before... During the night one cannot leave one's hole. The last days have finished me off altogether."

After three bloody days, the Allies managed to cross the river. Slowly, the German soldiers were driven up the slopes of Monte Cassino. But although reinforcements were thrown into the fray, the attacking force had fizzled out by 12th February. The front line was less than 400 metres from the abbey on Monte Cassino, but it might as well have been 400 kilometres.

The Allied commanders were frustrated, because the advance towards Rome was unable to gain real traction. A new attack was planned, this time with fresh Indian and New Zealand divisions to replace US forces.

The monastery was destroyed

Prior to the offensive, Alexander made a controversial decision: he decided to bomb the medieval monastery on Monte Cassino. Until then, the magnificent building had remained undamaged, because the Germans had declared the monastery a neutral zone.

With its location on top of the mountain, the monastery could have played a crucial role, with its unobstructed views of the battlefield for miles around, just as batteries placed there could have covered the hillside and made an offensive even more difficult. But Field Marshal Kesselring wanted to save Italy's cultural treasures from the fury of war. The commander of the Indian division, however, didn't trust the enemy's guarantees and demanded that the abbey be levelled first. Alexander capitulated – soldiers' lives were more important than bricks and mortar.

On the morning of 15th February, the sky was filled with a swarm of planes. The engine noise was deafening as over 250 Allied bombers flew over Monte Cassino and dropped their bombs. The attack was the war's largest Allied air operation in support of ground troops to date. To a German lieutenant on the mountainside, the detonations felt as though a "huge giant was shaking the town".

Several hundred Italian refugees perished inside the abbey. The Allies had given advance warning of the attack via a leaflet drop, but the people within refused to believe the bombing raid would happen. In the days that followed, German radio indignantly protested against the Allies' action.

Strategically, the bombing was also a failure. German units near the monastery did suffer significant losses,

Albert Kesselring

The ever-optimistic Kesselring was loved by his soldiers. After the war, he was active in several veteran organisations.

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD

Master of the retreat

"Smiling Albert" Kesselring proved to be a military genius. When the Italians surrendered to the Allies in the autumn of 1943, Hitler wanted to evacuate the southern half of the country. But Kesselring refused. He planned to use the mountains to delay the Allies and hold Rome until the summer of 1944. Hitler gave him the opportunity, and throughout the rest of the war, Kesselring tied up large numbers of Allied forces on the Italian peninsula.

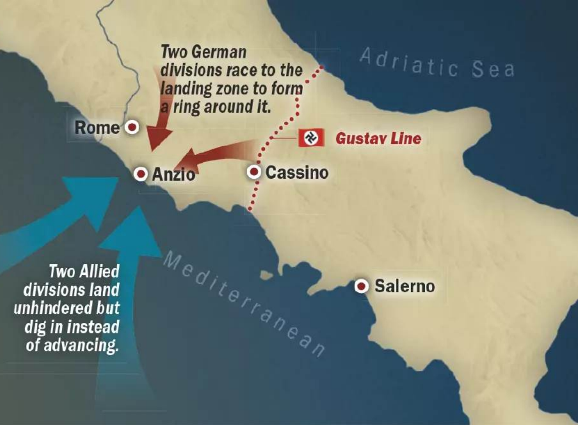
In 1947 he was sentenced to death for war crimes, but after protests, Kesselring was instead given his freedom in 1952.

Landing failed

The Allies tried to bypass the Gustav Line by landing behind the German front. Instead, the troops in the bridgehead at Anzio were trapped inside.

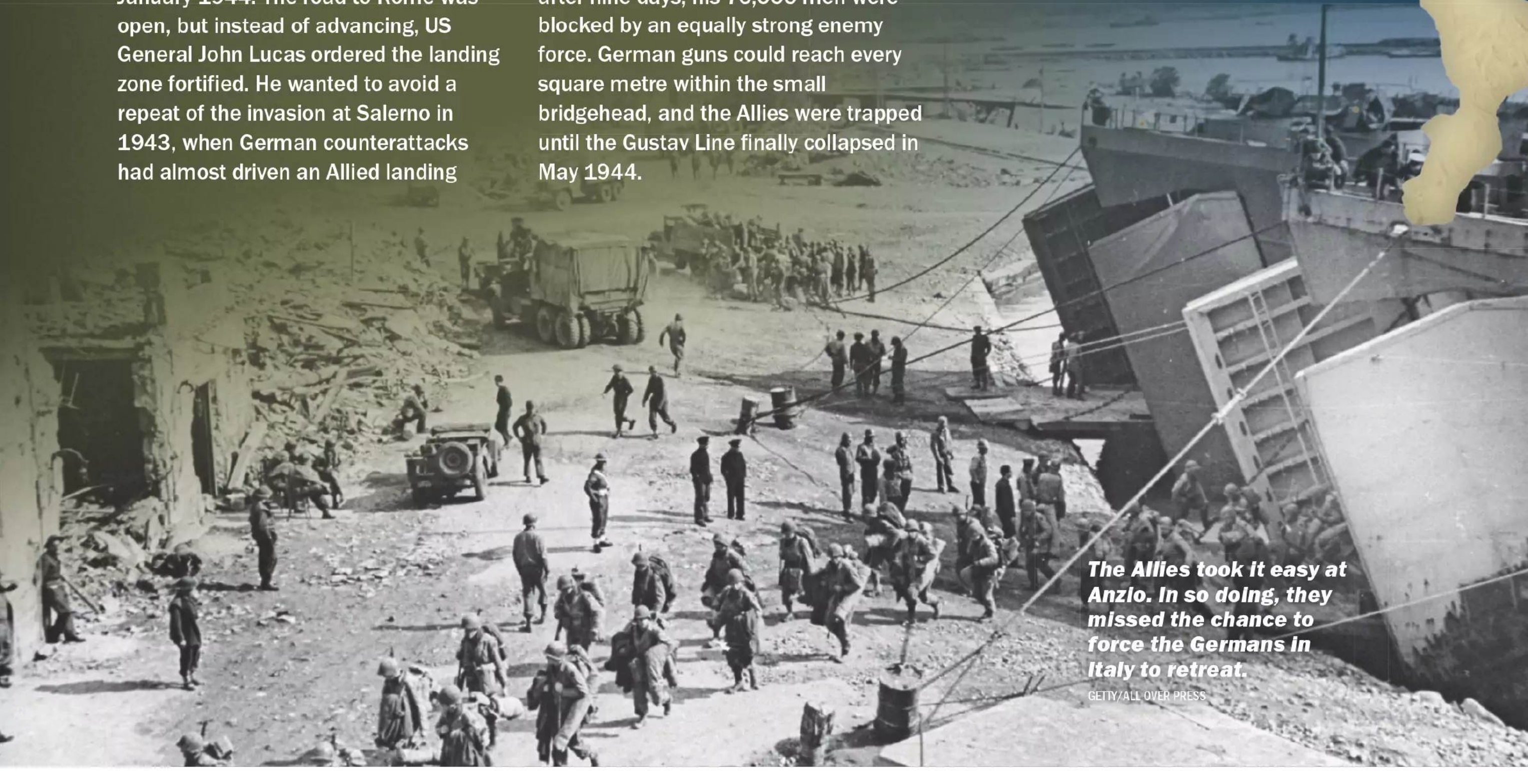
Allied troops encountered no resistance as they landed at Anzio, 50 km behind the Gustav Line on 22nd January 1944. The road to Rome was open, but instead of advancing, US General John Lucas ordered the landing zone fortified. He wanted to avoid a repeat of the invasion at Salerno in 1943, when German counterattacks had almost driven an Allied landing force back into the sea. But in so doing, he missed his opportunity.

When Lucas finally tried to advance after nine days, his 70,000 men were blocked by an equally strong enemy force. German guns could reach every square metre within the small bridgehead, and the Allies were trapped until the Gustav Line finally collapsed in May 1944.



Two German divisions race to the landing zone to form a ring around it.

Two Allied divisions land unhindered but dig in instead of advancing.



The Allies took it easy at Anzio. In so doing, they missed the chance to force the Germans in Italy to retreat.

GETTY/ALL OVER PRESS

but the Indian division wasn't ready to attack until two days later. And as the soldiers began to climb the slopes on 17th February, they were met by deadly gunfire from the ruins that the Germans now occupied. The rubble proved to be excellent cover for the German machine-gun positions.

After catastrophic losses, the troops were ordered to halt the attack the following day. The few territorial gains that had been made were abandoned, because they offered no cover against the Germans' weapons. Down in Cassino, the New Zealanders' attack had also failed in similar fashion, and the offensive was halted to avoid sacrificing any more soldiers.

Germans refused to give in

The New Zealanders made a fresh attempt a month later, on 15th March. Again, heavy bombers were deployed to soften the target. The old houses in the city of Cassino were reduced to rubble, and the German paratroopers suffered heavy losses, too. However, the ruins also blocked the Allied tanks' passage, so the infantry had to fight alone.

House by house, the New Zealanders fought their way into the city, while the Indians slowly advanced up the slopes of Monte Cassino. But even though the division's cool-headed Nepalese got so close to the monastery that they could almost touch the walls, it was impossible to get inside. The German paratroopers' doggedness halted the Allies in Cassino and on the mountain.

On 20th March, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent an enquiring telegram to Alexander:

"I wish you would explain to me why this passage by Cassino, monastery, ▶

NEW ZEALANDERS WERE RELIABLE

The small country only had enough troops to supply one division of around 17,000 men. In return, it gained a reputation for being among the best in the British Empire. Allied generals preferred the New Zealanders to the Australians, who were known for the ferocity of their attacks but had a reputation for poor discipline.

Monte Cassino was a tough nut to crack – even for the formidable New Zealanders.

POLFOTO/TOPFOTO

hill, etc, all on a front of two or three miles, is the only place which you must keep butting at. About five or six divisions have been worn out going into these jaws."

In his reply, Alexander explained the strategic importance of Monte Cassino, but also admitted that the Allies had been caught unawares: "The tenacity of these German paratroops is quite remarkable, considering that they were subjected to the whole of the Mediterranean Air Force plus the better part of 800 guns under the greatest concentration of firepower which has ever been put down and lasting six hours. I doubt if there are any other troops in the world who could have stood up to it and then gone on fighting with the ferocity they have."

The general, however, heeded Churchill's advice, and the offensive was called off. Instead, Alexander began to plan a push across a broader front in May. Meanwhile, the Allied troops dug themselves into their new positions, and some sort of everyday routine was established – marked by the endless thunder of artillery and a never-ending series of small battles.

Welcome to hell

For the soldiers on both sides of the front, spring 1944 brought only endless suffering and loss.

"What we are going through here is beyond description. I have never experienced anything like this in Russia, not even a second's peace, only the dreadful thunder of guns and mortars… Here we have nothing but terror and horror, death and damnation," wrote a German private.

The short distance between the sides meant that the only safe places were foxholes or basements beneath the ruins. As soon as any soldier left his hiding place, his life was in danger. "On the way to Company HQ, a distance of less than 200 metres, there are at least 20 German dead – how it happened is all too evident," a German soldier in Cassino reported. "[The Tommies'] snipers shoot only too well. Again and again head wounds. The mortars fire and the whistle and explosion of shells goes on, day and night. Sometimes, for a moment or two only, there is peace, and then I think of home."

The Allies also suffered constant losses from shells and mines. In the months running up to the action at the Gustav Line, German engineering troops had had plenty of time to lay explosives, and the minefields were a constant danger. The terrain also made everyday life difficult: "It took a laden man 4.5 hours to climb to the Battalion area. All water, ammunition and rations had to be carried by hand, as the route was impassable to mules," a British regiment's war diary recorded.

Fatigue was spreading among the soldiers, but the Allies had an advantage – General Alexander was able to replace his exhausted troops. Ahead of the fourth offensive in May, front-line troops at Monte Cassino were relieved by fully-rested Poles and Britons. Forces were also moved from the east coast, so Alexander had 25 divisions and 11 brigades available in the west.

Kesselring didn't have the same resources, because the German army in Italy was close to breaking point. The field marshal could only muster nine

Tug of war over a corpse

The battle for Monte Cassino lasted for four months and was fought man-to-man. Many soldiers viewed the battlefield as its own mini universe.

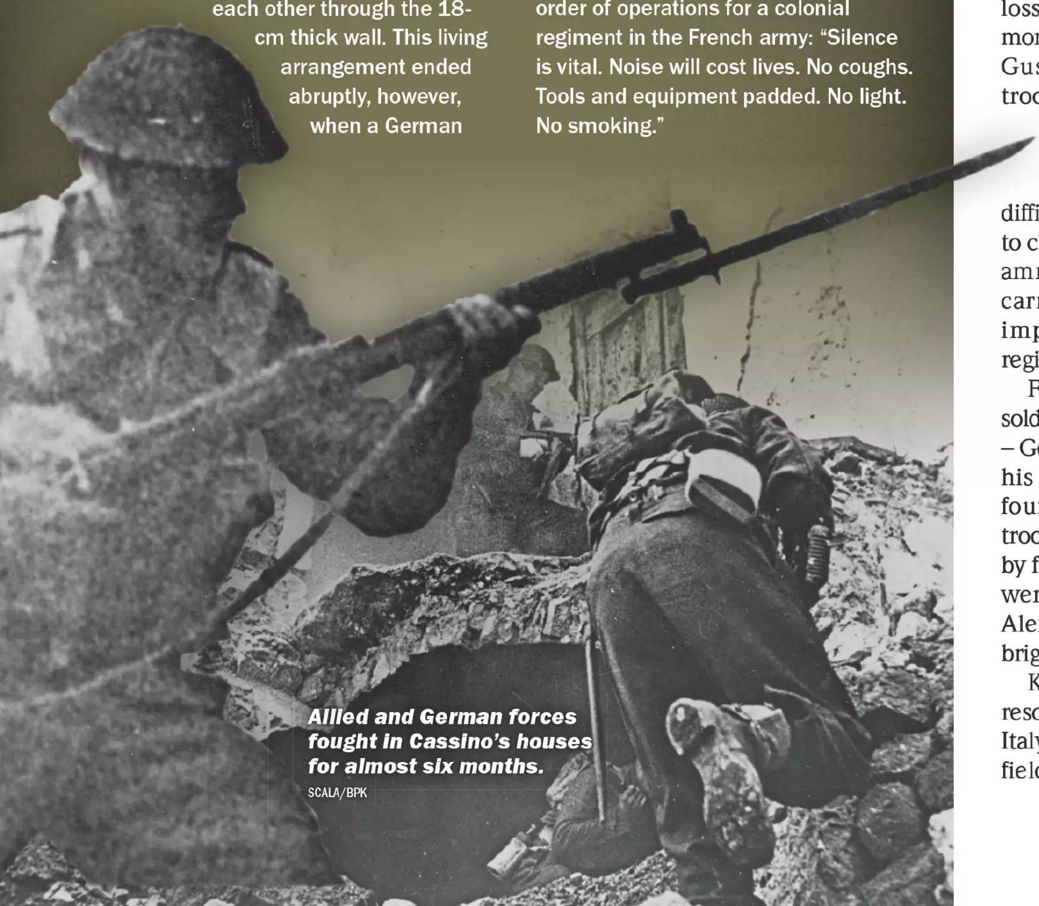
There were few places during World War II where the opposing sides fought so closely than at the Gustav Line in the spring of 1944. In many places, the two forces were often little more than ten metres apart.

"The Germans are so close that they can reach over and crack my men on the knuckles with a broom," reported one US company commander.

In the city of Cassino, a New Zealand division lived next-door to the Germans for three days. Soldiers could hear each other through the 18-cm thick wall. This living arrangement ended abruptly, however, when a German explosive device blew a hole in the top of the wall, and the Allies responded with a barrage of hand grenades.

At one section of the front in the mountains, British soldiers on the mountain tried to haul a German corpse in from no-man's land with a hook on a stick to search his pockets for important documents, while the Germans used signal wire to try to drag the corpse back to their own shelter.

Soldiers had to remain alert to survive. This was made very clear in the order of operations for a colonial regiment in the French army: "Silence is vital. Noise will cost lives. No coughs. Tools and equipment padded. No light. No smoking."



Allied and German forces fought in Cassino's houses for almost six months.

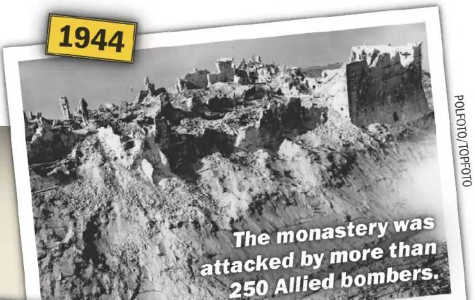
SCALA/BPK

Monastery's treasures were saved

As part of a planned attack on 15th February 1944, Allied planes bombed the monastery on Monte Cassino to rubble, despite its rich architecture dating from the 5th Century AD. Luckily, the abbot had already spirited away its many cultural treasures. In October 1943, an art-loving German officer warned him the monastery would be at the heart of an upcoming defensive line. 70,000 books, archives and numerous precious paintings were brought to safety in Rome as a result.

A US diplomat assured the Vatican that the monastery would be rebuilt. A cardinal replied dryly: "Even if you rebuild it in gold and diamonds, it still isn't the monastery."

That said, the monastery's motto was *Succisa Virescit* ("having been cut down, it flourishes."). These words were prophetic, as after the war rebuilding work began. In 1964, Pope Paul VI was able to rededicate the sacred basilica, which towers over the surrounding land.



The monastery was attacked by more than 250 Allied bombers.

POLFOTO/TOPFOTO

The reconstructed building is visited every year by Catholics and tourists.

POLFOTO/CORBIS

divisions, so the paratroopers had to remain at their post at Monte Cassino.

"Not a single man of my original squad is left," wrote a German soldier home to his father. "It seems to be the same in the entire company."

The odds were slowly turning in favour of the Allies ahead of Alexander's next attempt to punch a hole in the Gustav Line.

The Gustav Line finally fell

Code-named Operation Diadem, the fourth battle for Monte Cassino began on 12th May. Just before dawn, two Polish divisions set off towards the monastery. They were well rested and far outnumbered the German defenders.

As with the previous attacks, the paratroopers responded with machine-gun salvos. The German positions at the top of the mountain were strong, and wounded soldiers were soon streaming to the hospitals behind the front. "Some crawled to us on their own, others were helped by friends, others were slung over shoulders like sacks," recalled a field doctor called Majewski.

Despite the fierce attacks, the offensive stalled. Like other Allied forces before them, the Poles realised that the Germans' position on Monte Cassino was too strong. The attack was interrupted, in the hope that an opportunity would arise. It did, five days later. Again, it was the soldiers from France's North African colonies who paved the way for the Allies. On the westernmost part of the front, the men broke through the German defences so that British divisions were able to advance into the Liri Valley, and the entire Gustav Line wavered. The Poles took advantage and went on the offensive once more. Again, the German paratroopers' defences were strong, but from their positions at the top of Monte Cassino, the soldiers could see the British forces making their way through the Liri Valley. The prospect of being surrounded caused the defences to crumble. Finally, Polish soldiers were able to storm the monastery and Monte Cassino fell.

On 17th May, Kesselring finally abandoned the Gustav Line, fearing that all his divisions would be surrounded. While the British were invading the Liri Valley, Allied forces finally broke out of the bridgehead at Anzio after four, exhausting months. The Allies still had a chance to capture Kesselring's forces, but instead the divisions from Anzio set course for Rome to gain the honour of being the first Allies in the Eternal City. Kesselring's divisions escaped and established a new line of defence further north.

The battle for Monte Cassino cost more than 75,000 dead and wounded soldiers, and the survivors were forever scarred psychologically. In an Allied prisoner of war camp, German Sergeant Richard Kruppa forbade his men to mention the battle: "Speak about women, but not about Cassino!"

For the North African regiments, who'd proved more effective than any other Allied troops in Italy's mountains, a new conflict loomed. Ahead lay a struggle for independence from France, and many of the soldiers from Monte Cassino would go on to fight alongside the rebels. After Algeria gained its independence in 1962, former sergeant Ben Bella was elected as the country's new president.

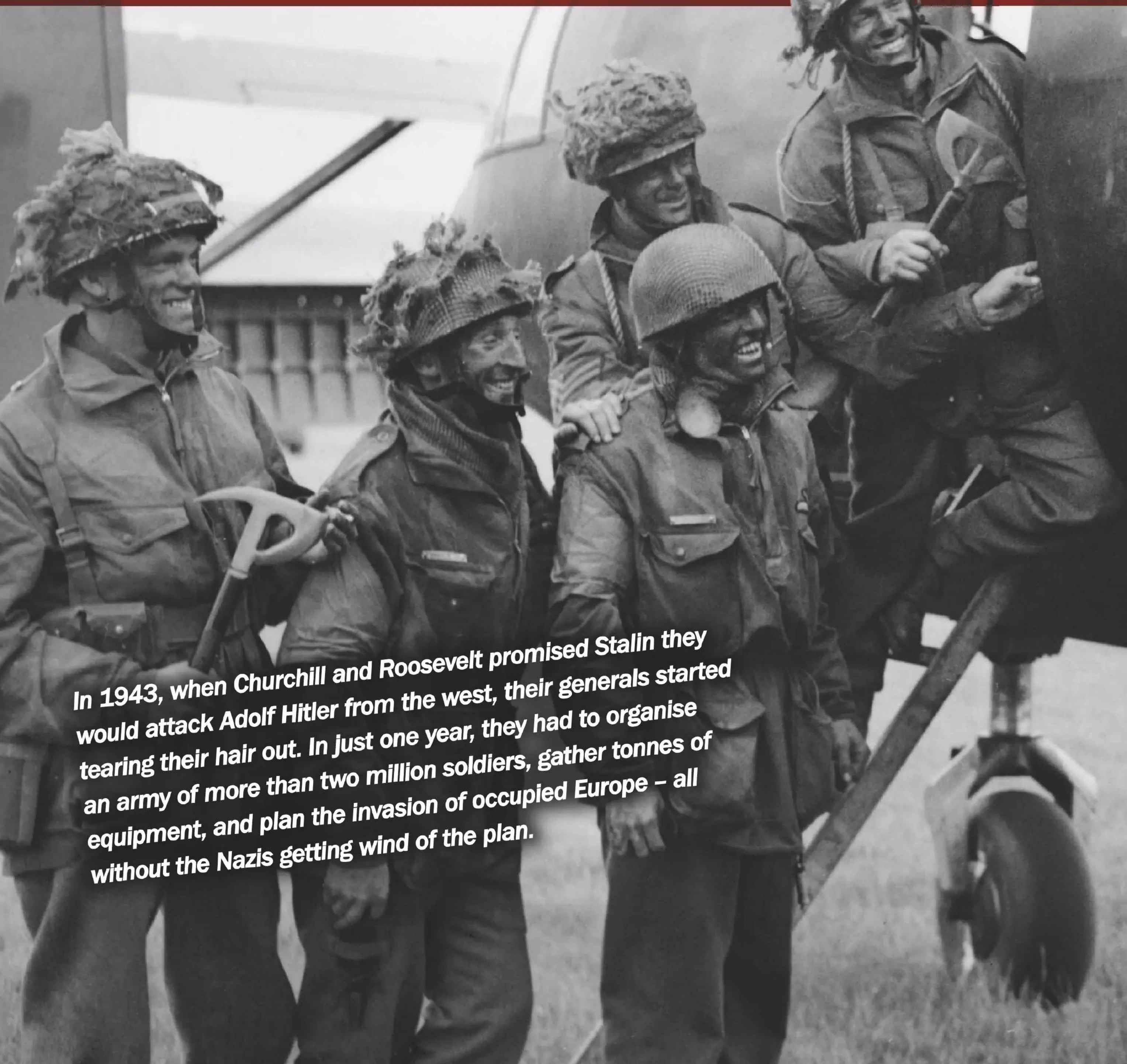
POLES TOOK THE MONASTERY

When an Allied flag finally rose above the monastery, it bore the colours of Poland. During Hitler's and Stalin's partition of the country in 1939, many Poles had been captured by the Red Army. After the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, 55,000 were permitted to travel through Iran to join British forces.

Poles who fought with the Allies weren't welcome in communist Poland after 1945.

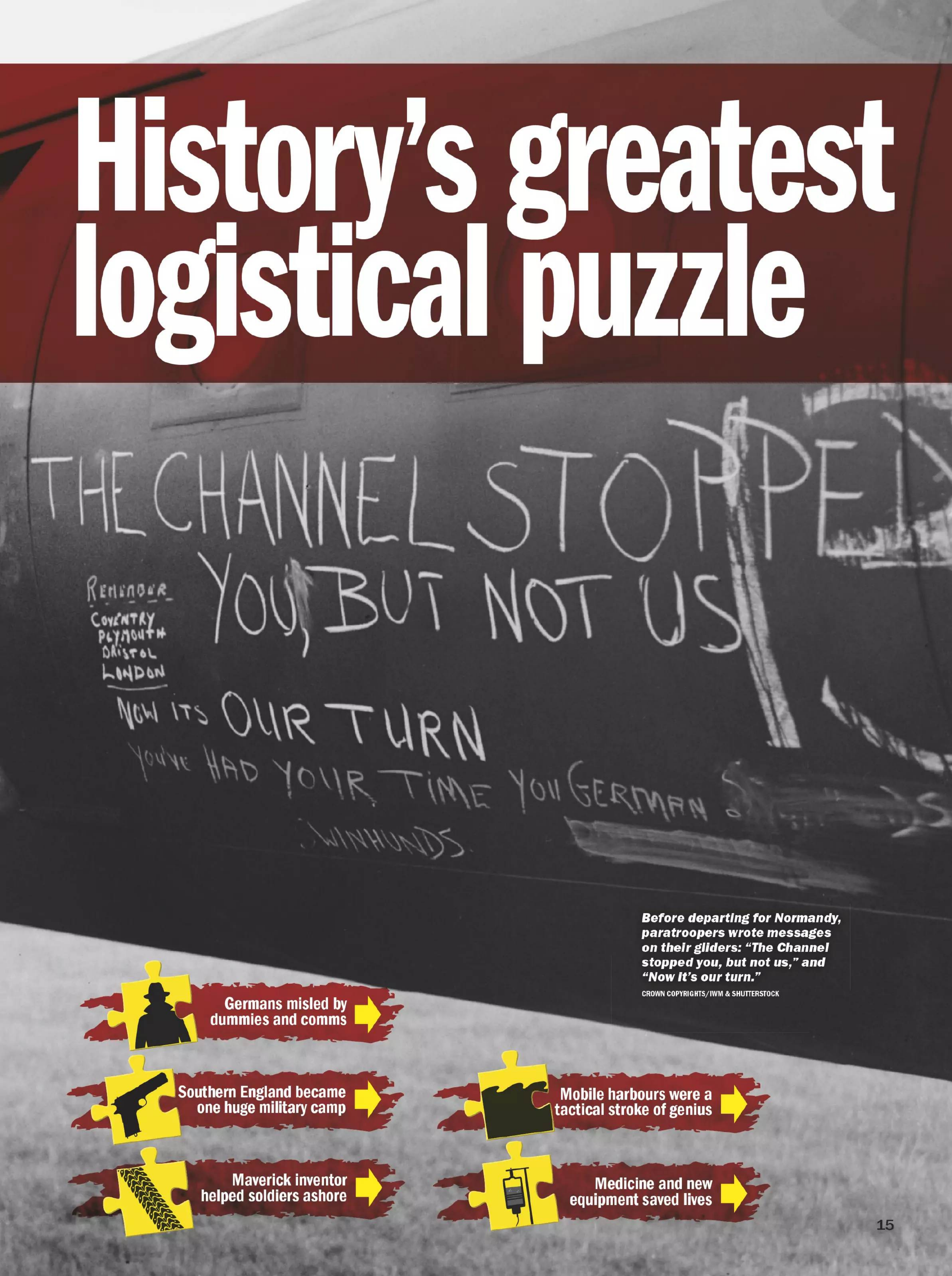
GETTY/ALL OVER PRESS

D-DAY



In 1943, when Churchill and Roosevelt promised Stalin they would attack Adolf Hitler from the west, their generals started tearing their hair out. In just one year, they had to organise an army of more than two million soldiers, gather tonnes of equipment, and plan the invasion of occupied Europe – all without the Nazis getting wind of the plan.

History's greatest logistical puzzle


THE CHANNEL STOPPED
YOU, BUT NOT US
REMEMBER
COVENTRY
PLYMOUTH
BRISTOL
LONDON
NOW ITS OUR TURN
YOU'VE HAD YOUR TIME YOU GERMAN
SWINHUNDS.

Before departing for Normandy, paratroopers wrote messages on their gliders: "The Channel stopped you, but not us," and "Now it's our turn."

CROWN COPYRIGHTS/IWM & SHUTTERSTOCK

Germans misled by dummies and comms

Southern England became one huge military camp

Maverick inventor helped soldiers ashore

Mobile harbours were a tactical stroke of genius

Medicine and new equipment saved lives

BY KASPER TONSBERG SCHLIE & ANDREAS ABILDGAARD

Winston Churchill toasted Joseph Stalin, loudly declaring: "I drink to the proletarian masses." The Soviet leader replied: "I drink to the Conservative Party." These astonishing words were spoken on Churchill's 69th birthday, which he celebrated during a conference of the Allied powers in Tehran on 30th November 1943.

Since the beginning of the war, the British Prime Minister had feared for his country's future, but that day he dared to believe in peace again. Before the celebration ended at 02.00, US President Roosevelt also made a toast: "We can see in the sky, for the first time, that traditional symbol of hope, the rainbow."

Over the past days, Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt had agreed on a plan to defeat Nazi Germany. While the Soviets would continue their pressure on the Eastern Front, Britain and the US would invade German-occupied Europe from the west.

Attack on French port failed

The agreement in Tehran was the culmination of years of negotiations and diplomatic wrangling. Since 1941, Stalin had been trying to get the Western powers to open a new front against Germany. This would force the Wehrmacht to divide its efforts and ease the pressure on the beleaguered Red Army.

However, the US had its hands full fighting Japan in the Pacific, while Britain had been busy battling the Germans in Africa.

Internally, the Western powers also argued about the strategy for the invasion. The British proposed invading Germany from the south via Italy and the Alps. The Americans rejected the proposal – saying that the supply lines would be too long. Instead, they wanted to land in France, from where forces could quickly reach the German industrial centre – the Ruhr district.

A decision was therefore made to test the possibility of an invasion of France by tentatively attacking the French town of Dieppe in August 1942. Six thousand British and Canadian soldiers were to take the port from the sea, but the Germans were prepared and won a crushing victory; 60 per cent of the invasion force was killed, wounded or captured. Despite the failure, the Allies gathered crucial knowledge about tactics, landing craft and air support for amphibious operations.

The brains behind D-Day

Briton selected invasion site

• Frederick E Morgan, lieutenant general

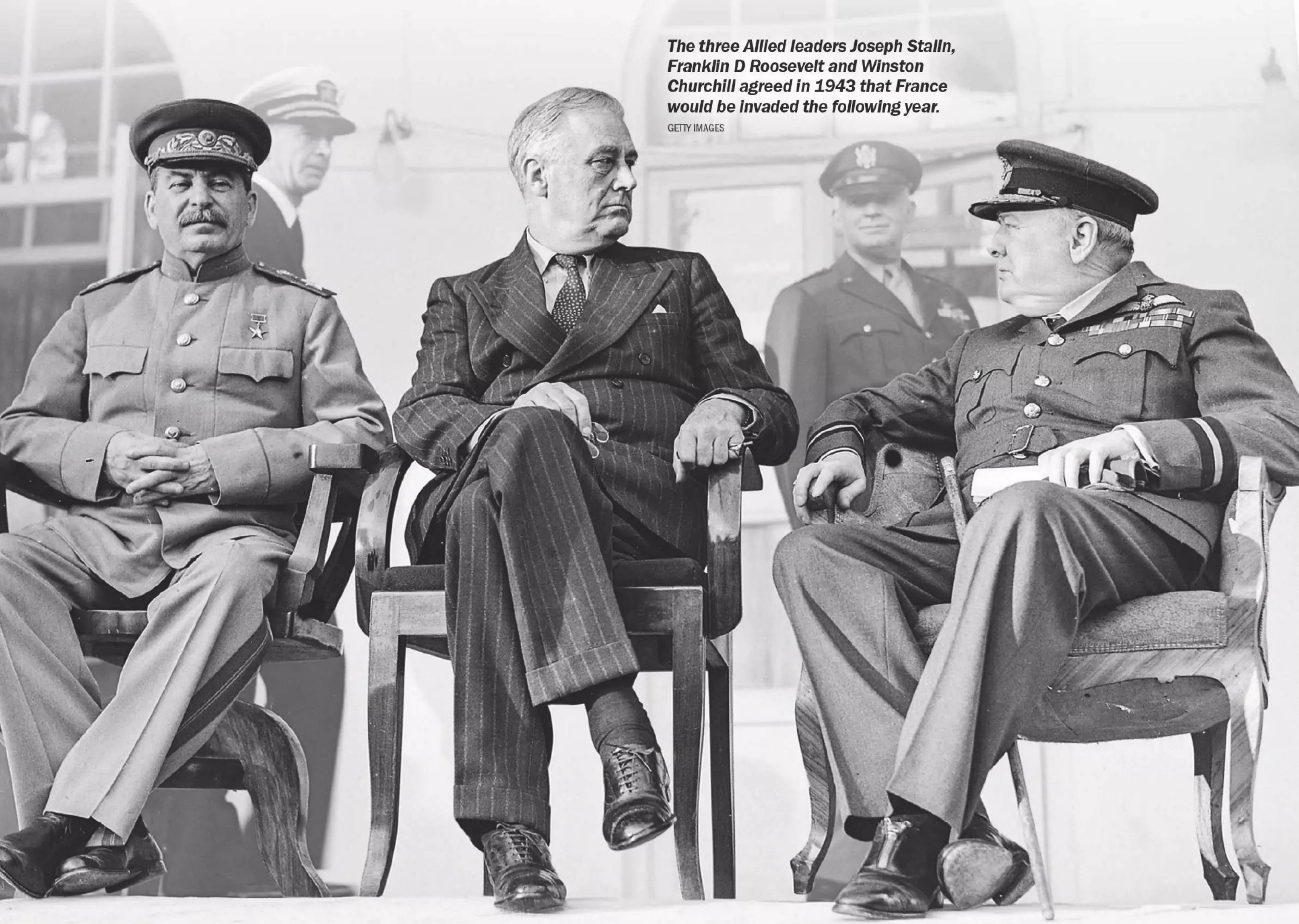
As one of Eisenhower's deputy chiefs of staff, Morgan was responsible for the initial planning of Operation Overlord. He made a number of crucial decisions, including that the invasion would take place in Normandy and that paratroopers would be used.

GETTY IMAGES

Sicily had to be captured first

In May 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill met in Washington to agree on the time and place for the upcoming military operations in Europe.

First, Sicily had to be taken. The aim was to force Italy out of the war before the main invasion of the continent. A year later, on 1st May 1944, an invasion force would set out from England and ▶



The three Allied leaders Joseph Stalin, Franklin D Roosevelt and Winston Churchill agreed in 1943 that France would be invaded the following year.

GETTY IMAGES

Germans misled by dummies and comms

The Allies' Operation Bodyguard was the name given to a series of operations designed to conceal where and when D-Day would take place.

Double agent Juan Pujol García misinformed the Germans about the invasion plans.

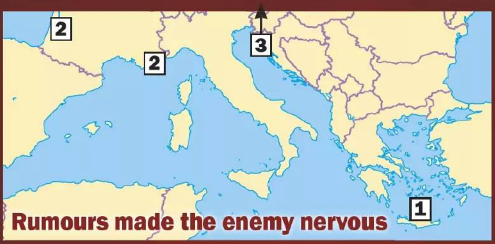
CROWN COPYRIGHTS/IWM

British double agent fooled the Nazis

Fortitude South: By setting up empty camps and dummies in Kent and Essex, the Allies tried to trick the enemy into believing that the invasion would be at Calais, where the distance across the English Channel was shortest.

The Germans were fooled by the bluff – not least because of the double agent Juan Pujol García, code-named Garb by the Allies. Earlier in the war, he had gained the Germans' trust by sending them seemingly useful reports that were based on train timetables and news from the weekly cinema reels.

When Juan Pujol García announced that the attack would be at Calais, the Wehrmacht believed him. Even after D-Day, the Germans still kept 21 divisions ready at Calais.



Rumours made the enemy nervous

SHUTTERSTOCK

1 Crete: The Brits created three fictitious armies in Egypt. Via leaked false messages, they caused the Germans to fear a Balkan invasion.

2 South of France: Double agents led the Germans to believe that two British divisions would be landed at Bordeaux and Monaco.

3 Norway: Stalin helped mislead the Western Allies by sending ships and troops to the Gulf of Kola near German-occupied Norway.

INSANE OR INGENIOUS? ★★★★★★

The operation succeeded. Even after the Normandy landings, the Germans still believed that the real invasion would come further north at Calais.

IMAGESELECT

Dummies were meant to make the Germans believe that the camps in Kent and Essex were full of Allied soldiers.

Edinburgh Castle served as the headquarters of a fake army.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Radio traffic tied up Nazi troops in Norway

Fortitude North: The Allies stationed a fake army in Edinburgh. The army was to give the Germans the impression that an invasion of Norway was imminent; 334 soldiers created so much radio traffic that the Germans believed the army to be 250,000 strong.

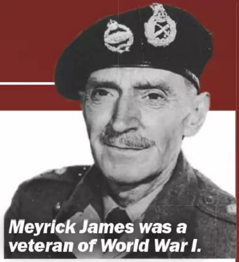
The Nazis were also fed false information about meetings with Swedish diplomats to authorise the Allies to fly in Swedish airspace.

INSANE OR INGENIOUS? ★★★☆☆☆

The Wehrmacht kept 13 divisions in Norway because of the threat – without really believing that the Allies would invade across the North Sea.

Where's Monty?

Operation Copperhead: The British used an actor to mislead the Germans. Australian Meyrick James was working in London theatres when the military hired him to play Montgomery. A few weeks before D-Day, he was put into uniform and sent on a tour of Gibraltar and North Africa – to convince the Germans that an invasion was not imminent.

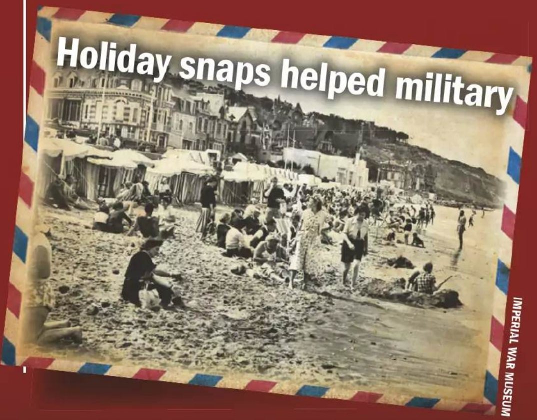


Meyrick James was a veteran of World War I.

CROWN COPYRIGHTS/IWM

INSANE OR INGENIOUS? ★☆☆☆☆☆

German generals said after the war that they had wondered about Monty's tour. But it did not make them lower their guard.



Holiday snaps helped military

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Ahead of the invasion in 1944, the BBC ran a competition: submit your best holiday photo from Europe. What listeners didn't realise was that the snaps were sent straight to the military. Many of the nearly 10 million photos submitted were taken on French beaches and were used to prepare for the invasion of the continent.

INSANE OR INGENIOUS? ★★★★☆☆

The photographs helped the army create accurate 3D models of the Normandy beaches.

South of England became one huge military camp

In the weeks before D-Day, troops, vehicles, ships, aircraft and supplies were moved to southern England. There, the Allied command assembled everything required for the largest landing in world history.

HEADQUARTERS

Allied leaders set the strategy for the invasion.

GETTY IMAGES

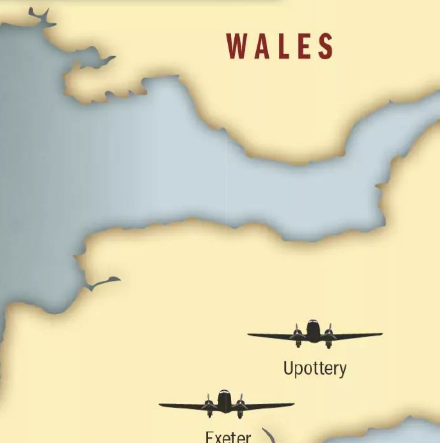
Plan was made in London

Norfolk House: Operation Overlord was conceived in the Allied Forces High Command at Norfolk House near St James's Park in London.

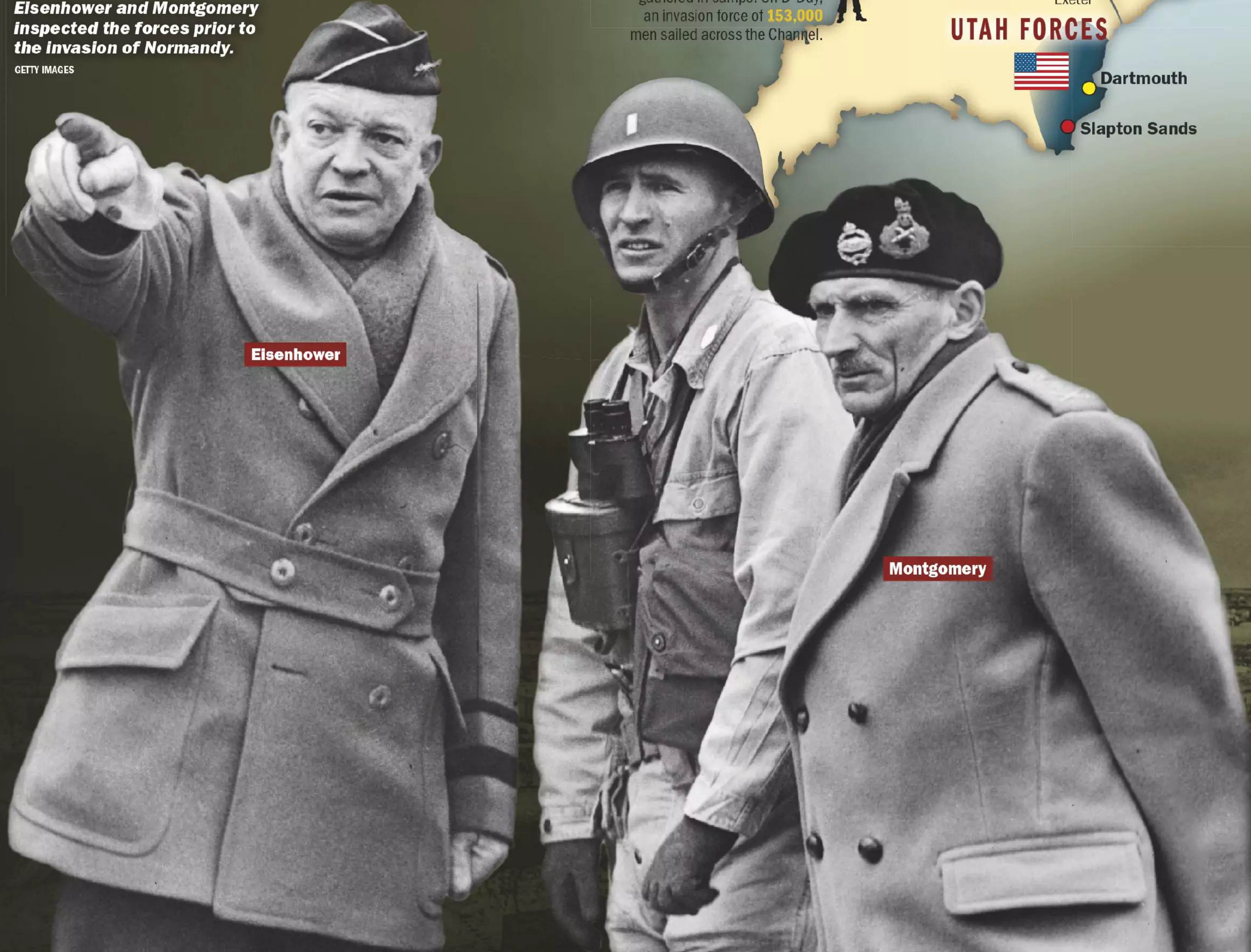
AIRCRAFT:
11,500 bombers, fighters, transport planes and gliders flew more than **14,000 missions** during the invasion. The aircraft took off from **134 air bases** and runways in the south of England.

SHIPS:
Almost **7,000 vessels** took part in D-Day. Among them were **100 destroyers**, based at Portsmouth naval base.

SOLDIERS:
More than **two million** soldiers from a total of **12 countries** gathered in camps. On D-Day, an invasion force of **153,000** men sailed across the Channel.



Eisenhower and Montgomery inspected the forces prior to the invasion of Normandy.
GETTY IMAGES



TRAINING

Exercises prepared the troops

Dover and 27 other locations: Training areas for the armed forces were classified as top secret, where no civilians were allowed. Among other things, they trained with amphibious tanks that could sail to the coast on D-Day.

Slapton Sands: To prepare for D-Day, the Allies trained for their amphibious assault on beaches in England. The US force that was to attack Utah Beach conducted exercises there with up to 30,000 soldiers. The realistic training meant that the Allied soldiers were well prepared for the real invasion.

Major exercises were organised to prepare the soldiers for D-Day.

RITZAU/SCANPIX

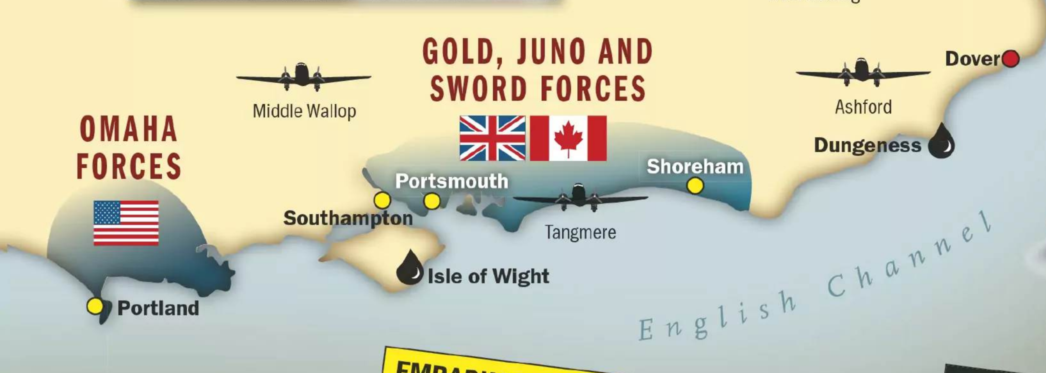
DEPOTS

Island was about to sink

Southern England: By 1944, thousands of sites had been converted into depots for all the equipment needed during the invasion. Much of it was hidden in barns and boarded-up houses, while the rest was left lying in fields. Locals joked that the whole island would sink if the Americans continued to send supplies and war materiel.

British women sewed parachutes to be used on D-Day.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM



Cameras mounted on British Spitfires captured images of the invasion area.

SHUTTERSTOCK

EMBARKATION PORTS

Five invasion forces sailed out

In total, more than 20 British ports were used as the invasion force departed in the hours leading up to D-Day.

○ **Dartmouth:** The port of departure for the 21,000 Americans who were to attack Utah Beach. Strong currents meant that the first soldiers had to land a full 1.8 kilometres south of the agreed landing point.

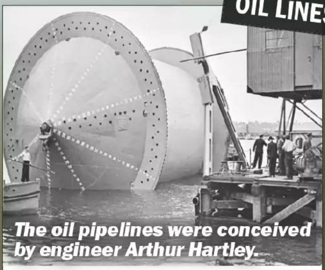
○ **Portland:** 443,250 men – mostly US troops – were to attack Omaha Beach. The soldiers were met with massive German resistance.

○ **Southampton:** Around 25,000 British soldiers set sail for Gold Beach. Many of their tanks sank into the soft sand on the beach.

○ **Portsmouth:** A force of 21,400 Canadian, British, French and Norwegian soldiers were to attack Juno Beach. High waves caused delays, but the beach was captured with relatively few casualties.

○ **Shoreham:** The attack on Sword Beach was initiated by amphibious tanks; 28,845 soldiers took part.

OIL LINES



The oil pipelines were conceived by engineer Arthur Hartley.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Oil ran underwater

Isle of Wight and **Dungeness:** To ensure a constant supply of oil for the war effort, the Allies laid two so-called PLUTO oil pipelines under the Channel. The pipelines could deliver 6.1 million litres of fuel per day – and are considered one of the greatest engineering feats of World War II.

Fighter jets took photos from the air

France was closed to the Allies between 1940 and 6th June 1944. Yet they successfully gathered information about the terrain in Normandy.

Hundreds of Spitfires took up to two million photographs of northern France. These images were examined by 1,700 analysts who created maps of every hamlet and field in Normandy. The images were also used to create 3D models of the invasion beaches.

Thousands of tanks, jeeps and planes filled the British countryside in spring 1944.

GETTY IMAGES

attack the German forces in France. Supply lines there would be relatively short, and the attacking troops could get effective air support during the fighting – something the soldiers had lacked at Dieppe. In the summer of 1943, British Lieutenant General Frederick E Morgan was therefore tasked with drafting Operation Overlord – the code name for the entire Normandy operation.

The brains behind D-Day

American was in charge

• Dwight D Eisenhower, general

In December 1943, General Eisenhower was chosen as the commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces. This placed ultimate responsibility for the planning and execution of D-Day and subsequent operations with the US general.

GETTY IMAGES

The challenges were piling up. Where would the soldiers land? How many divisions should be included in the first wave? How many ships, aircraft and tanks were needed? How could more than 150,000 soldiers be supplied with everything from tanks to pencils when there was no harbour available?

Although planning was still in its early stages in November 1943, Winston Churchill expressed optimism during the Tehran Conference:

"History has given us a great opportunity," he said. "Now let us get down to business."

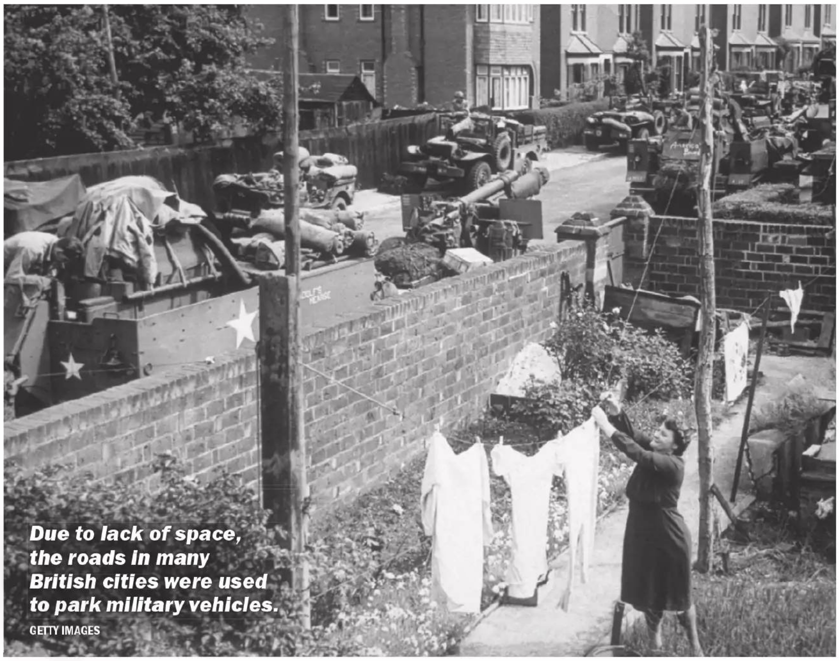
The prime minister's optimism was understandable. In the autumn of 1943, US soldiers poured into Britain, and in December, US General Dwight D Eisenhower was appointed as commander-in-chief of Operation Overlord. The invasion plans began to take shape. By January 1944, 937,308 American soldiers had arrived on British soil, bringing with them 3,553,755 tonnes of equipment – including tanks, planes, jeeps, guns and ammunition.

The plan changed

Not everyone shared Churchill's optimism. One of them was Bernard Montgomery, who was put in charge of planning and executing the actual attack on D-Day – Operation Neptune.

Neither Eisenhower nor Churchill was happy with the appointment of General Montgomery to lead the invasion force – both found him difficult to work with. But thanks to the support of his friend, the influential Field Marshal Alan Brooke, who pointed out that Montgomery was the best Allied commander, he got the job.

Arriving in London in January 1944, the experienced officer was not impressed. For nine months, Morgan had worked tirelessly day and night on his detailed invasion plan, but during a meeting, Montgomery coldly dismissed it, saying that the scale of the invasion had to be reassessed.



Due to lack of space, the roads in many British cities were used to park military vehicles.

GETTY IMAGES

Morgan had planned to land three divisions in Normandy between the Vire and Orne rivers. Montgomery wanted to take a much more drastic approach.

He demanded two more divisions and a longer line of attack along the coast. This would require 263 additional landing craft for tanks and infantry, as well as 24 more destroyers and five cruisers.

The extra soldiers meant that each division had to make do with 1,450 vehicles instead of the planned 3,000. Montgomery didn't care. He said that if he wasn't given the additional men, the Allies would have to find another general.

The changes to Morgan's plan meant that D-Day could not be launched on 1st May, as had been planned. Allied leaders had to find a new date with the right combination of a full moon and high tide, which would increase the chances of a successful landing. The light from the full moon would make it easier to see obstacles on the beach, while high tide meant the landing craft could get closer to the beach before the ramps were lowered. The entire operation was therefore postponed until 5th June – more than a month later.

Villages sacrificed for D-Day

The British coast was transformed into one large deployment area, with the Allies training for the attack on the beaches.

The first exercise in January 1944 was conducted so amateurishly that the corps commander noted that no one would have survived if it had been a genuine operation. The troops were slow to get out of the boats and on to land as they were weighed down with equipment. When they were finally on solid ground, the units were in chaos. Fortunately, there were several months left to train.

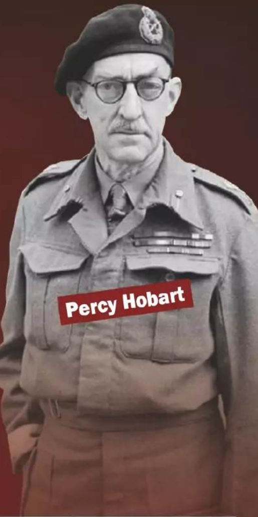
During the winter months, more and more of the southern English coast was closed off to the public so that troops could train in secret. Entire villages had to be evacuated to make work difficult for any German spies. A letter from London to the 220 inhabitants of the fishing village of Tyneham stated:

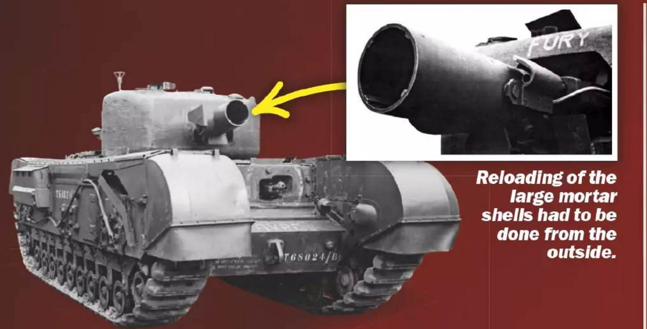
"The Government appreciate that this is no small sacrifice which you are asked to make, but they are sure that you will give this further help towards winning the war with a good heart."

Eisenhower described England as "the greatest operating military base of all time", as Operation Overlord gradually ▶

Maverick inventor helped soldiers ashore

To ensure D-Day's success, a division of the British Army known as Churchill's Toyshop developed a series of specialised vehicles. The new machines were converted tanks and the mastermind behind them was military expert Percy Hobart, an unconventional and inventive general.



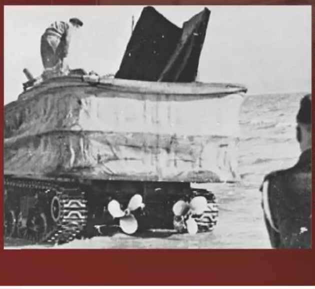


Reloading of the large mortar shells had to be done from the outside.

Tank could swim

Sherman DD tank: One of Hobart's goals was to build a sailing tank. The task was solved by mounting a so-called flotation screen around the gun turret of a Sherman tank. The screen could be folded up and give the tank enough buoyancy to float.

The amphibious tanks were sailed to the French coast, where they rolled into the water and chugged towards land at 7 km/h using two propellers. However, they could only withstand waves up to 30 cm high, so dozens of Sherman DD tanks sank off Omaha Beach.



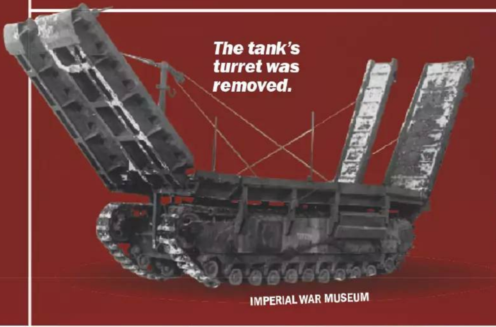
IMAGESELECT & IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Shells shattered bunkers

Churchill AVRE: During an unsuccessful attack on the German-occupied town of Dieppe in 1942, Allied leaders realised that the Germans' strong concrete bunkers could not be defeated with normal tanks. The solution to this problem was the production of the Churchill AVRE – a modified version of a British Churchill tank.

The tank was equipped with a mortar capable of firing 290-mm shells with 18 kg of explosives – known as flying dustbins. On D-Day, 180 AVRE tanks were sent into action with great success. Their mega shells destroyed countless German positions, saving the lives of many Allied soldiers.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM & CROWN COPYRIGHTS/IWM



The tank's turret was removed.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Rivers and streams no obstacle

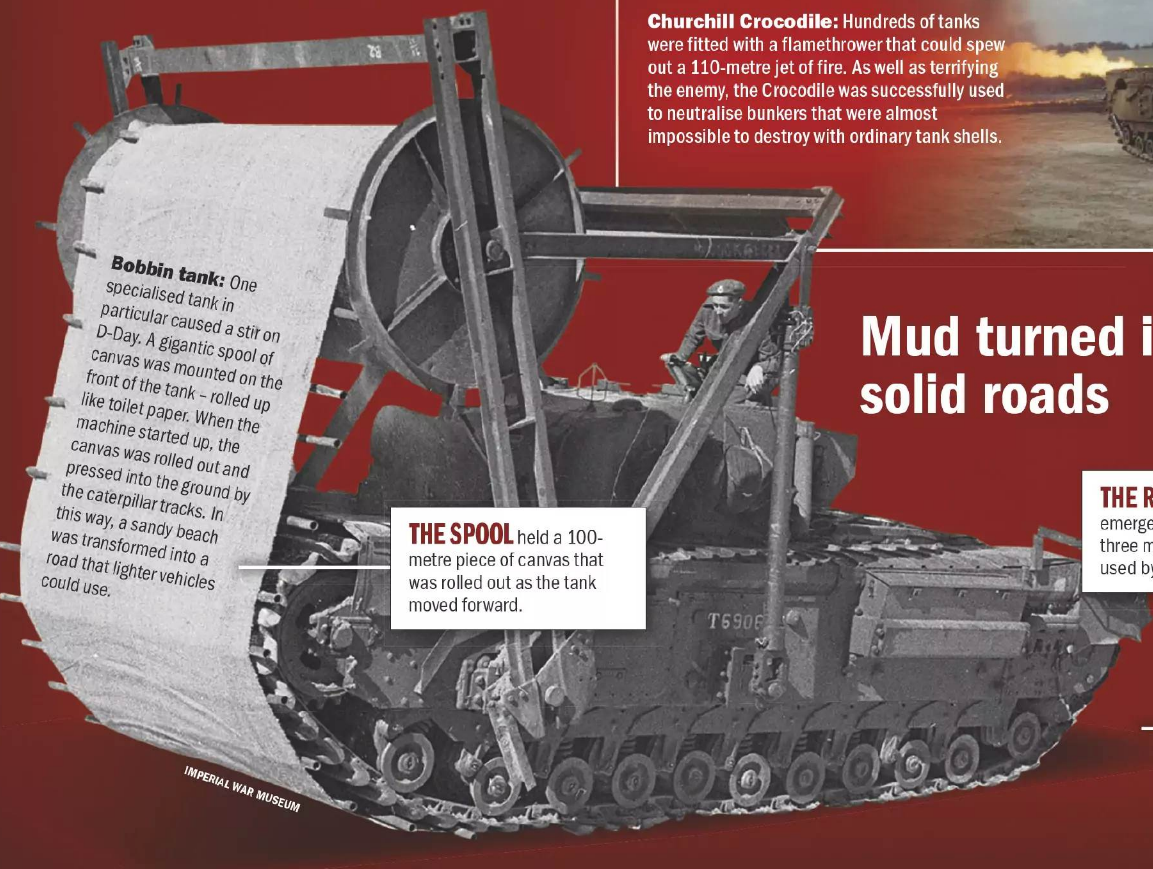
Armoured Ramp Carrier: Normandy was criss-crossed by rivers and ditches. The Allies needed to be able to bridge them quickly. Percy Hobart developed a tank that functioned as a drawbridge. This enabled other vehicles to cross most waterways.

Germans in flames

Churchill Crocodile: Hundreds of tanks were fitted with a flamethrower that could spew out a 110-metre jet of fire. As well as terrifying the enemy, the Crocodile was successfully used to neutralise bunkers that were almost impossible to destroy with ordinary tank shells.

CROWN COPYRIGHTS/IWM

Mud turned into solid roads



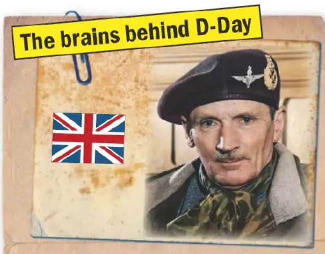
Bobbin tank: One specialised tank in particular caused a stir on D-Day. A gigantic spool of canvas was mounted on the front of the tank – rolled up like toilet paper. When the machine started up, the canvas was rolled out and pressed into the ground by the caterpillar tracks. In this way, a sandy beach was transformed into a road that lighter vehicles could use.

THE SPOOL held a 100-metre piece of canvas that was rolled out as the tank moved forward.

THE ROAD of canvas that emerged behind the tank was three metres wide and could be used by jeeps and light lorries.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

The brains behind D-Day



GETTY IMAGES

Stubborn officer led the invasion

- **Bernard L Montgomery, general (later field marshal)**

As commander-in-chief of the Allied ground troops, Monty was responsible for attacking the beaches and creating a beachhead. He was loved by his men, but was also known as an obstinate officer.

came to dominate every aspect of daily life.

The authorities forbade the British media from speculating on when the invasion would take place, and all freight and passenger transport into the country was monitored.

The Allies also prepared beyond their borders; 6,800 sea mines were laid off the French coast – with a gap off Normandy – and bombing of Nazi aircraft factories, oil depots and railways intensified.

The northern French railways were hit particularly hard, because the Germans had to be prevented from sending reinforcements to Normandy after D-Day. However, the RAF had to be careful not to bomb Normandy excessively, or the enemy would be able to work out where the invasion would take place. Fortunately, the Allies had an effective way of misinforming the Germans about the invasion site.

For this, they activated the double agent Juan Pujol. The Germans trusted him, but the Spaniard was loyal to London. He sent the Nazis false reports saying that the Allies intended to attack further north at the port of Calais. As a result, the Germans worked hard to strengthen defences here.

Production couldn't keep up

In April 1944, the invasion was barely two months away and the mood was tense at Allied headquarters in London. Eisenhower wrote to a friend, "The atmosphere is more electric than ever before."

However, the preparations were not yet complete. For example, the generals were worried about the lack of landing craft to transport tanks to France – and tanks were crucial if the Allies were to push the Germans back quickly. The problem grew so great that even Churchill got involved:

"How it is that the plans of two great empires ... should be so much hamstrung and limited by a hundred or so of these particular vessels will never be understood by history," he thundered.

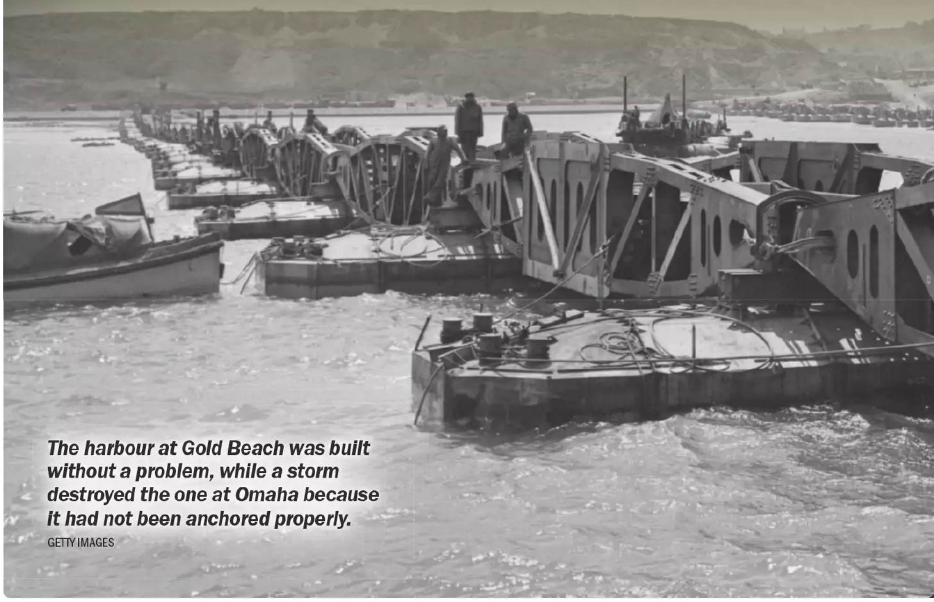
"I fear that we shall be accused unjustly of not doing our best," he added.

Things got worse for the Allies on 28th April 1944. A landing exercise on Slapton Sands suddenly became a genuine battle. Nine German speedboats spotted a convoy of landing craft sailing along obliviously, not expecting to encounter enemies. The German attack was merciless. Torpedoes sank two vessels, killing 200 sailors and 500 soldiers.

Despite this setback, preparations continued unabated. The US war industry managed to relieve the overworked British factories and also solved the problem of the lack of landing craft by supplying 300 more. By the end of April, Britain had become a fortress in the sea when a secret code hidden in a BBC broadcast went out to France, activating the French Resistance and

Mobile harbours were a tactical stroke of genius

One of Operation Overlord's biggest challenges was that the Allies did not have a harbour where all the troops, vehicles and equipment could be landed. The solution was to create two ports as pre-fabricated kits, so-called Mulberry harbours, which were transported from England and assembled off the coast of Normandy.



The harbour at Gold Beach was built without a problem, while a storm destroyed the one at Omaha because it had not been anchored properly.

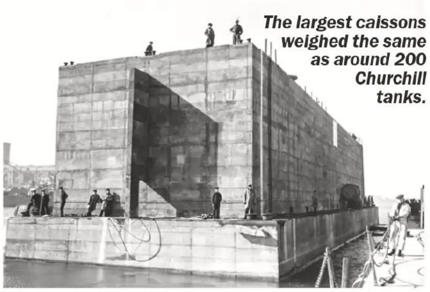
GETTY IMAGES

PHOENIXES

Concrete blocks stopped the waves

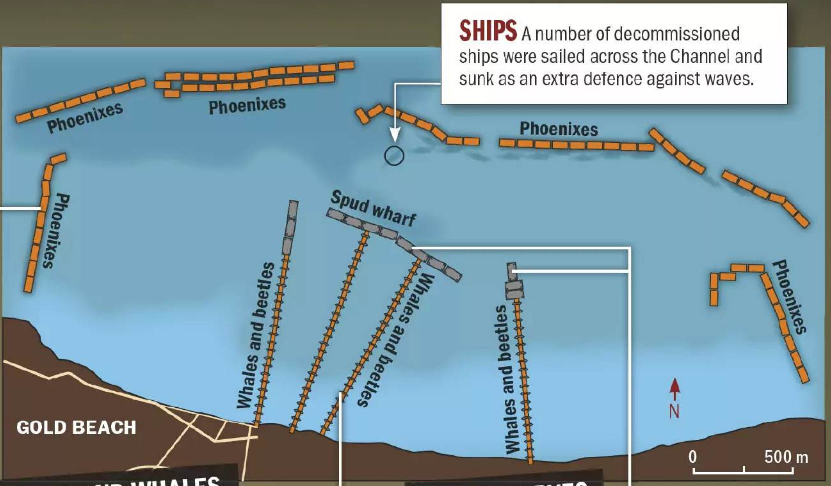
To storm-proof the harbour, a series of 2,000-6,000-tonne concrete caissons – called phoenixes – were placed as breakwaters off the coast.

- The phoenixes were sunk off the British coast before D-Day. Shortly before they were to be used, they were emptied of water, allowing the huge concrete elements to rise to the surface of the sea. Hence their name, a reference to the phoenix rising from the ashes.
- Each phoenix was towed to Normandy by two tugs travelling at just three knots. In total, 160 tugs were deployed and had to cross the Channel several times.
- Anti-aircraft guns on top of the phoenixes protected the concrete boxes against attacks from enemy aircraft.



The largest caissons weighed the same as around 200 Churchill tanks.

RITZAU/SCANPIX



SHIPS A number of decommissioned ships were sailed across the Channel and sunk as an extra defence against waves.

SHUTTERSTOCK

BEETLES AND WHALES

Makeshift roads led to coast

Floating pontoon bridges were used to transport vehicles and goods to the coast.

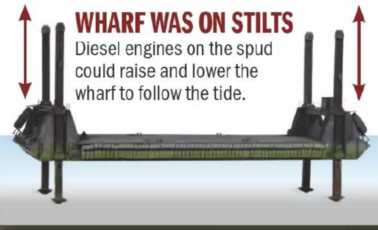
- A whale was an approximately 26-metre-long roadway deigned to flex in stormy weather without being destroyed by the waves.
- The roads were carried by floating pontoons called beetles, which were attached to 330-kg anchors on the seabed with steel wires.

SPUD WHARVES

Men could live under the wharves

Like a modern drilling platform, the spud wharves were towed into position, where their four 30-metre-tall legs could be lowered to the seabed. Using the legs, the wharves could be raised and lowered with the tides.

- One spud element was 65 m by 20 m.
- Each of the elements had mounted cranes that could lift goods from the ships on to waiting lorries.
- The interior of the spud had built-in sleeping and mess rooms to accommodate all the men working on the temporary harbour facility.



WHARF WAS ON STILTS

Diesel engines on the spud could raise and lower the wharf to follow the tide.

UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW LIBRARY

setting off a wave of sabotage against German targets.

"Tonight we go"

Every aspect of Operation Overlord had been planned by 1st June. But despite the meticulous planning, there was one thing the generals had no control over – the weather. A storm on 4th June resulted in the invasion being put on hold. The high waves would make it difficult for small landing craft to reach the beach.

On the morning of 5th June at 04.15, Eisenhower met with the military meteorologists. The weather forecast wasn't perfect, but it was good enough to give the green light for the operation to begin on 6th June. Soon after, Churchill sat down at his desk, where he wrote a short telegram to Stalin:

"Tonight we go," it said.

Four years earlier, the British had feared a German invasion. Now, 153,000 soldiers were ready to attack the Nazis on the other side of the English Channel.

For the occasion, General Eisenhower issued a message to the forces that he had personally written: "Soldiers, sailors ▶

The brains behind D-Day

BRITISH OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHER/IWM

Hero of Dunkirk led the fleet

- **Bertram Home Ramsay, admiral**

The Allies were in no doubt when it came to choosing a commander for the huge fleet. Admiral Ramsay had evacuated 338,000 British soldiers from Dunkirk in 1940 and had commanded the fleet during the invasion of Sicily in 1943.

IMAGESELECT

The brains behind D-Day

Bombers spread destruction

• Trafford Leigh-Mallory, air marshal

As commander-in-chief of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force, Leigh-Mallory was responsible for bombing the Germans before and during D-Day. The air marshal died later that year when he and his family were in a plane crash in the French Alps.

and airmen … You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you."

British General Montgomery spoke to his men himself before the crossing: "The time has come to deal the enemy a terrific blow in Western Europe," the field marshal proclaimed.

Preparations paid off

After D-Day, Montgomery maintained that everything went to plan: "The outstanding point about the Battle of Normandy," he said "is that it was fought exactly as planned."

The battle had been won, but the British field marshal had exaggerated. Poor communication, low cloud and frightened pilots meant that most of the 23,400 paratroopers landed far from their target. The marines also had to use helmets to bail water out of their landing craft, and logistical problems meant that only 100 of the planned 2,400 tonnes of equipment made it to Omaha Beach.

But despite these failures, Operation Neptune was a resounding success.

The Nazis' Atlantic Wall was only half finished and it was impossible for the Germans to stop the continuous waves of soldiers before they established five beachheads in Normandy. After just six days of fighting, Allied forces were able to connect the beachheads and form a united front against the Wehrmacht.

By the end of August, around two million soldiers had been landed in France and the capital, Paris, liberated. Less than a year after the birthday celebration in Tehran, Allied forces had successfully completed the largest amphibious assault in world history and brought Hitler's Third Reich to its knees.

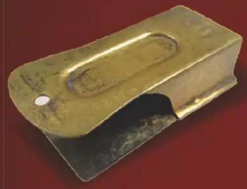
Medicine and new equipment saved lives

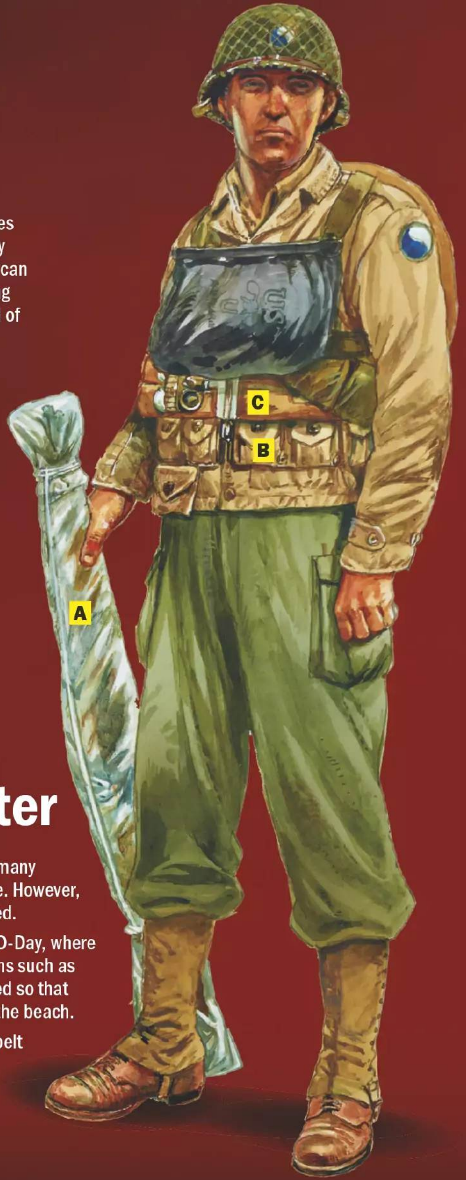
The largest landing operation in history required more than floating harbours and tanks. The British and American militaries invested heavily in anything that would ensure victory.

HERSHEY'S
Tropical
CHOCOLATE

CHOCOLATE BAR Hershey's chocolate factories in the US developed an emergency ration that only melted at 50°C. The bar was included in all American field rations, but quickly became unpopular among soldiers – it was hard, difficult to chew and tasted of anything but chocolate.

SIGNALLING DEVICE The D-Day troops (paratroopers) carried a device to help them find each other in the dark. Small steel and brass clickers made a sound like a cricket when pressed. One click meant "who's there?". An answering two clicks meant "a friend".





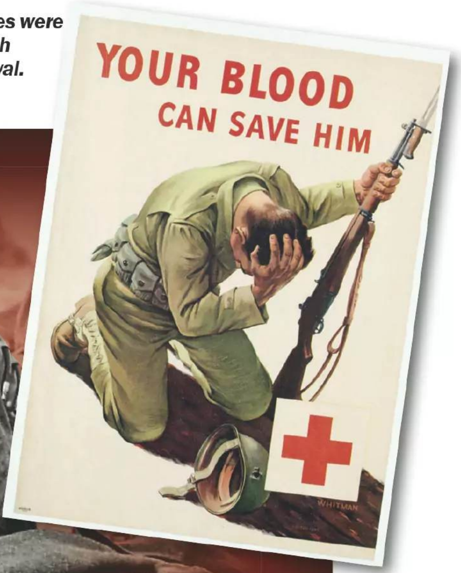
Waterproof holster

A To protect their weapons from the sea water, many soldiers carried a waterproof holster for their rifle. However, the weapon could still be fired even when wrapped.

B An assault vest was developed especially for D-Day, where soldiers would need lots of pockets for small items such as pliers and hand grenades. The vest was perforated so that water quickly ran out when the soldiers reached the beach.

C The US troops wore an M1926 inflatable life belt around their waist. Unfortunately, many soldiers drowned because the life belt tipped them upside down in the water.

Wounded soldiers on the beaches were immediately given plasma, which improved their chances of survival.

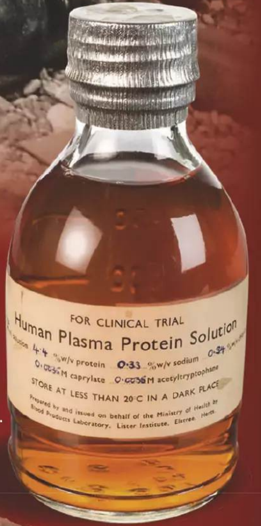

YOUR BLOOD
CAN SAVE HIM
WHITMAN

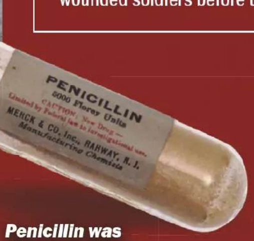
GETTY IMAGES, BRIDGEMAN IMAGES, IMAGESELECT, PETER DENNIS/OSPREY PUBLISHING, ICOLLECTOR.COM & VINTAGE ADDS

Speedy medical attention was crucial

PENICILLIN

BLOOD PLASMA A programme in the US had arranged for around 15,000 Americans to donate blood. Under the direction of Dr Charles Richard Drew, doctors extracted plasma, which can be stored for a long time without being frozen. The plasma was shipped to Europe, where field doctors and nurses could give it to wounded soldiers before they bled to death.


FOR CLINICAL TRIAL
Human Plasma Protein Solution
STORE AT LESS THAN 20°C IN A DARK PLACE


PENICILLIN
5000 Florey Units
MERCK & CO., Inc., RAHWAY, N. J.
Manufacturing Chemists

PENICILLIN In a race against time, the highly effective antibiotic was developed during World War II. The basic research was carried out in the UK, but it was in the US that the drug saved the first human life in 1942. When it became clear that the US was going to participate in the invasion of German-occupied Europe, production was ramped up. In just a few months, the US company Pfizer produced 2.3 million doses of penicillin that were available on D-Day.

Penicillin was discovered by microbiologist Alexander Fleming in 1928.

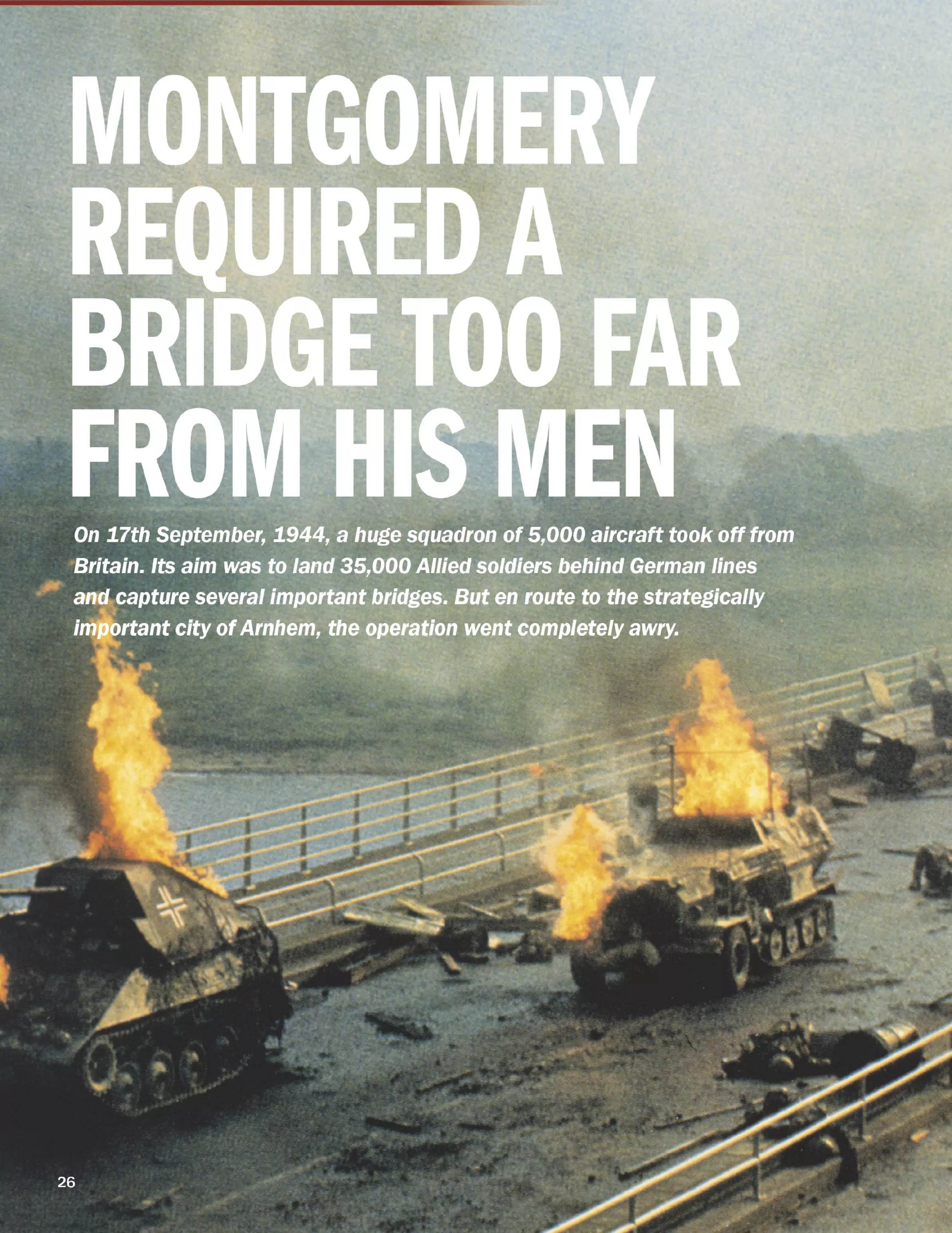
MORPHINE When it was necessary to operate on wounded soldiers, doctors used morphine. Its analgesic effect helped keep patients calm during surgery and it was used generally to relieve the troops' pain.

1.5 cc. SYR
SOLUTION O
MORPHINE
TARTRATE
1/2 grain
in 1.5 cc.
Warning: May
habit-formin
E.R. SQUIBB

The field medic's main task was to stop bleeding and dress wounds.

MONTGOMERY REQUIRED A BRIDGE TOO FAR FROM HIS MEN

On 17th September, 1944, a huge squadron of 5,000 aircraft took off from Britain. Its aim was to land 35,000 Allied soldiers behind German lines and capture several important bridges. But en route to the strategically important city of Arnhem, the operation went completely awry.



NETHERLANDS/1944

After landing on the Normandy coast (D-Day), the Allies occupy Belgium and large parts of of France. Now British Field Marshal Montgomery presents his plan for the rapid liberation of the Netherlands and the capture of the Ruhr, the centre of German war production.

British paratroopers fought a major German force for days, but couldn't hold the bridge at Arnhem. The photo is from the film, A Bridge too Far (1977).

ULLSTEIN BILD

BY STINE OVERBYE

Field Marshal Walter Model was a creature of habit. Every day at 13.00 he would sit down at the table to eat his lunch and drink a glass of chilled Moselle wine. Sunday 17th September 1944, was just like every other day. On the stroke of one, Model was in his customary place in the dining room at his headquarters at the Tafelberg Hotel, located in Oosterbeek, a few kilometres from the Dutch city of Arnhem.

This time, however, the commander of the area's German forces found his routine rudely interrupted. Just as he bit into his bread, the door of the dining room slammed open and a clearly distressed officer rushed in. "I've just had news that gliders are landing at Wolfheze," the young German said.

Model pushed his chair back and jumped up. "They're after me and this headquarters!" he exclaimed, promptly issuing a stream of orders as he left the dining room. Within a few minutes he'd left the hotel, heading for his car and oblivious to the fact a button on his small case had popped open. His hastily packed shirts, underwear and toothbrush spilled out on to the driveway, but Model had no time to worry about his luggage. He'd discovered the hotel was surrounded by enemy soldiers. No matter which way he turned, paratroopers were dropping out of the sky like flecks of snow on a winter's day.

"Quick! Doetinchem! Bittrich's headquarters!" Model roared to his driver, throwing himself into the car waiting to drive him to Lieutenant General Willi Bittrich's headquarters in Doetinchem, a Dutch city one hour's drive from the Tafelberg Hotel.

The sky turned black

Model wasn't the only one caught unawares on this sunny and windless autumn day. A deafening rumble had preceded the skies turning black with planes over the south-east of England as morning turned to afternoon. People swarmed out of their houses and cars, dumbfounded as they watched the gigantic fleet pass over their heads.

General **James M Gavin**, commander of the US 82nd Airborne Division.

> "There's only one way to take this bridge ... Simultaneously – from both ends."

Formations of bombers towing gliders passed – almost wing-tip to wing-tip – escorted by fighter planes. The innumerable planes darkened the sky and it appeared to the spectators below that the machines formed some kind of flying carpet that seemed to extend endlessly beyond the horizon.

Priests delivering their Sunday sermons were drowned out by the noise, while the congregation in Westminster Abbey were unable to hear the organ over the drone of the planes. Puzzled parishioners left their pews to join the crowds of people on London's streets already waving and cheering. In north London, the Salvation Army orchestra was unable to make itself heard; with his eyes fixated on the planes in the sky, the drummer struck three short strokes followed by a long one on the drum: Morse code for 'V', as in 'victory'.

The hundreds of thousands of British spectators had no idea what was going on, but they knew it was something big. "This attack, wherever bound, must surely bring about the end of the war," Red Cross worker Angela Hawkins said firmly as she watched the airborne army from the window of her train.

Montgomery persuaded Eisenhower

The code name for the large-scale operation that had just begun was Market Garden, and as Hawkins could see, its purpose was to end World War II. The brain behind it was Field Marshal Bernard 'Monty' Montgomery, still intoxicated by the success of D-Day, when the Allies landed in Normandy on 6th June 1944. Now he planned a decisive strike against the Germans.

Montgomery's bold plan was to parachute 35,000 Allied men behind enemy lines in the biggest paratrooper operation ever. Supported by a British armoured column advancing through Belgium from the south, troops were tasked with capturing the bridges across the Rhine and its tributaries – in a narrow corridor nearly 100 kilometres long – to Arnhem in the Netherlands. They would then race to the Ruhr district and from there strike the heart of the German Reich in Berlin. The key target was the highway bridge in Arnhem itself, a concrete and steel structure barely 600 metres long that led across the Lower Rhine.

The operation emerged from the impasse the Allies found themselves in at the start of September 1944. After the magnificent triumph of D-Day in June followed by the carpet-bombing campaign against German cities, the Nazi army was not only seen as beaten, but their defeat so crushing that the Germans were thought to have lost their fighting spirit. Hermann Göring's air force was smashed and the German army – a patchwork of scattered units that survived the Battle of Normandy – everywhere in retreat. Although they defended their positions to the last man, the Germans were unable to put up much fight as the Allies rolled through France and Belgium, liberating Paris and then Brussels along the way.

The occupied people of the Netherlands also expected liberation to be just around the corner – in the early days of September, the Dutch flag flew from flagpoles and windows, orange stripes adorned buildings and thousands took up positions alongside the main roads with flowers in their hands, ready to receive the British tanks they hoped would come roaring from the south.

But the Dutch would wait in vain, because the closer the Allies came to the Fatherland, the stronger and fiercer the Nazi resistance became. Hitler refused to give up, and after licking their wounds after defeat in France, the Germans had again put together a makeshift defence that had slowed the advance. Nevertheless, Montgomery believed the Allies' victory was quite close, and Market Garden would be just the operation to deliver the final blow.

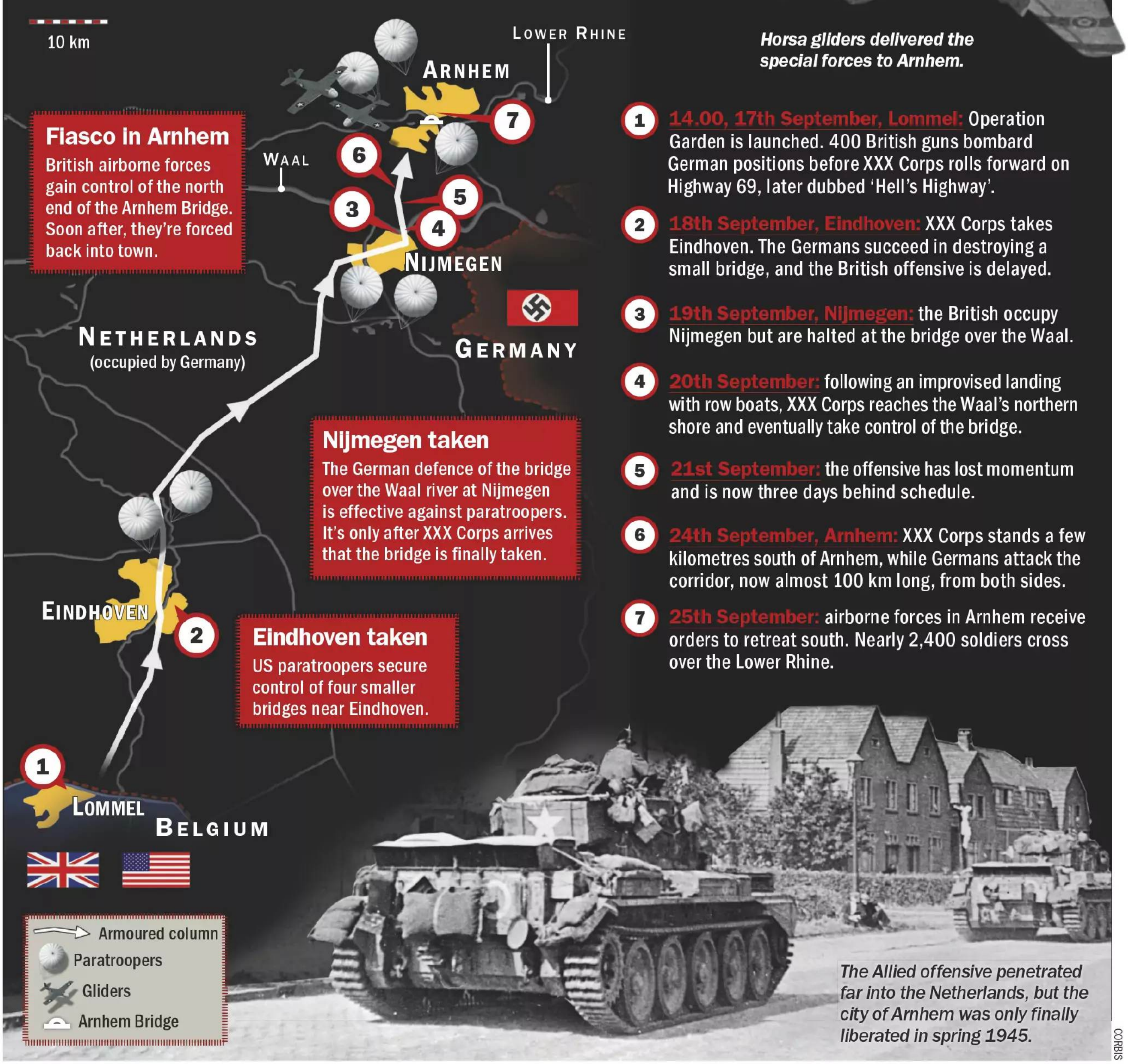
Initially, Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower opposed an advanced thrust over the Rhine and into Germany. He believed the strategy was too risky and preferred a slower advance over a broad front. But Montgomery was persuasive, again emphasising the operation's purpose was – in the words of Lieutenant General Frederick Browning – to "lay a carpet of airborne troops down over which our ground forces can pass". He then presented his trump card, a carefully prepared plan, settling the matter for Eisenhower: "I'll give you

The long road to the Rhine

Market Garden was a two-part operation: the airborne Operation Market would take control of nine Dutch bridges to open them up for Operation Garden – an armoured advance 100 kilometres into the Netherlands.

CLAUS LUNAU

Horsa gliders delivered the special forces to Arnhem.



Fiasco in Arnhem

British airborne forces gain control of the north end of the Arnhem Bridge. Soon after, they're forced back into town.

Nijmegen taken

The German defence of the bridge over the Waal river at Nijmegen is effective against paratroopers. It's only after XXX Corps arrives that the bridge is finally taken.

Eindhoven taken

US paratroopers secure control of four smaller bridges near Eindhoven.

① **14.00, 17th September, Lommel:** Operation Garden is launched. 400 British guns bombard German positions before XXX Corps rolls forward on Highway 69, later dubbed 'Hell's Highway'.

② **18th September, Eindhoven:** XXX Corps takes Eindhoven. The Germans succeed in destroying a small bridge, and the British offensive is delayed.

③ **19th September, Nijmegen:** the British occupy Nijmegen but are halted at the bridge over the Waal.

④ **20th September:** following an improvised landing with row boats, XXX Corps reaches the Waal's northern shore and eventually take control of the bridge.

⑤ **21st September:** the offensive has lost momentum and is now three days behind schedule.

⑥ **24th September, Arnhem:** XXX Corps stands a few kilometres south of Arnhem, while Germans attack the corridor, now almost 100 km long, from both sides.

⑦ **25th September:** airborne forces in Arnhem receive orders to retreat south. Nearly 2,400 soldiers cross over the Lower Rhine.

The Allied offensive penetrated far into the Netherlands, but the city of Arnhem was only finally liberated in spring 1945.

CORBIS

whatever you ask to get you over the Rhine because I want a bridgehead … but let's get over the Rhine first before we discuss anything else," he said on 10th September, 1944.

Enemy were "old men on bicycles"

Montgomery outlined his plan to Browning, commander of Britain's airborne forces, the same day, but was met with scepticism. Browning pointed out that the paratroopers and troops deployed by glider would not only have to capture the bridges, but also hold them for days until armoured forces arrived, pointing at the Arnhem bridge on the map, which was well over 100 kilometres behind German lines.

"How long will it take the armour to reach us?" he asked. "Two days" was Montgomery's swift reply. With his eyes still fixed on the map Browning replied, "We can hold it four. But sir, I think we might be going a bridge too far."

Despite his nagging doubts, however, Browning was immediately excited by the plan, despite fearing his ▶

Single-use aircraft carried 28

The British Horsa glider delivered troops to several operations. But they could only be used once.

The German conquest of Belgium in 1940 demonstrated the effectiveness of using gliders to deliver elite troops for missions behind enemy lines. Unlike parachutes, gliders ensured the soldiers arrived together. Britain's Horsa aircraft were used in several operations, including the invasion of Sicily and D-Day. The glider, which was built from wood to preserve metal supplies, was left on the battlefield. It had two pilots and could hold 28 soldiers or a jeep.

airborne troops in Arnhem would be left without protection if the armoured forces were delayed for any reason. If the Germans succeeded in blocking the narrow 100-kilometre-long corridor the tanks had to push through, or if the enemy blew up one of the bridges on the road, the soldiers would be left in dire straits, he realised.

But Montgomery reassured him that there were only demoralised German troops left in the Netherlands that he had no reason to be afraid of. Browning took these words on board, so when his own troops later raised concerns, he reassured them that they'd be fighting "Hitler Youth and old men on bicycles".

Alarming news from the Netherlands

Preparations for Operation Market Garden were characterised by their hectic bustle. In just a week, enough gliders, tow planes and transport aircraft would be required to carry 35,000 men along with their vehicles, weapons and other equipment. Nearly 5,000 aircraft were scraped together, including around 2,500 gliders and 1,500 fighter planes. In addition, timetables needed to be prepared for the numerous aircraft that would travel in three waves from 24 different English airfields. It was also equally important to produce and distribute thousands of maps covering the landing and battle zones.

The work was carried out around the clock at a flat-out pace, but even though it was an arduous task, the mood was high and optimistic. The prospect that the war could be done and dusted that autumn made everyone happy.

Or almost everyone. Major Brian Urquhart, intelligence officer on Browning's staff, believed Market Garden was a huge mistake and that the plan should be abandoned. He wasn't convinced that the Germans were ready to just "roll over and surrender".

British headquarters received reports from the Dutch resistance movement that indicated there were large formations of German panzer troops near to Arnhem, including the 9th SS Panzer Division and probably the 10th too. The information alarmed Urquhart, and at planning meetings he asked "whether the 'carpet' was to consist of live airborne troops or dead ones".

Just 48 hours before Market Garden was launched, Urquhart's fears were confirmed on the worst possible terms. Spitfires equipped with special cameras returned from a low-level reconnaissance sweep over the Arnhem area, delivering hundreds of aerial photographs. On a handful of them, heavy enemy tanks could clearly be seen concealed in the forested landscape.

Immediately, Urquhart ran over to General Browning's office, but after carefully studying the photos, Browning dismissed Urquhart's concerns. "I wouldn't trouble myself about these if I were you", he said reassuringly as he looked at the tanks, "they're probably not serviceable at any rate."

Brew at high altitude

On board the thousands of aircraft heading to the Netherlands at lunchtime on 17th September, a mixture of relief and nervousness prevailed. Finally, the operation was in progress, with the prospect of delivering a decisive strike in the war. At that moment "everything was so serene it was like going on a bus outing to the seaside", as one soldier recalled later.

The majority of pilots had no need to navigate, simply keep track of the planes at the front of the endless column as well as beacons from ships placed in the North Sea. "The launches below us were set out like stepping stones across the Channel", one of the pilots towing a glider observed.

As the armada – 15 kilometres wide and 150 kilometres long – approached the Dutch coast, the German anti-aircraft guns began to thunder. And as the sky was painted grey and black by puffs of flak, pilots fought through enemy fire. The fighters who'd escorted the fleet so far left the formation to attack the defensive positions. While exploding shells deafened the paratroopers, one glider pilot was more concerned about the danger inside the glider than the enemy fire outside it.

To his great consternation, the pilot discovered three soldiers were sitting on the glider's wooden floor, brewing tea over a primus stove while five others waited patiently, mugs in hand. Terrified, he turned over control to his co-pilot and rushed back to extinguish the burner, which was frighteningly close to the glider's stash of mortars. "We're just having a little brew up", one of the embarrassed soldiers explained apologetically.

Determinedly, the pilots led their gliders through the flak to the landing zones. But everywhere below them in the fields they could see German positions reveal themselves – haystacks opened to send out volley after volley of fierce anti-aircraft fire into the sky. Some hit their target – with fiery explosions several aircraft crashed to the ground, but most

TOPFOTO/SCANPIX

Spirits were high at the start of the operation. Paratroopers were convinced the bold mission would end the war.

arrived safely, albeit by the skin of their teeth. "Now they give us a latrine!" one US paratrooper exclaimed as a piece of shrapnel came up through his seat just as he stood up.

German tanks started to move

As the gliders landed and paratroopers spilled from the planes over the Arnhem area, Field Marshal Model arrived at Lieutenant General Bittrich's headquarters after an hour's drive.

"They almost got me! They were after the headquarters. Imagine! They almost got me!" Model exclaimed as he came through the door. It was Bittrich's job to tell his superior officer that he hadn't been the target.

Just half an hour earlier – at 13.30 – Bittrich had been informed of the airborne assault by his two armoured divisions, the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions camouflaged in the woods around Arnhem. Although he didn't yet have a full overview, Bittrich had formulated a theory about the Allies' intentions: the enemy would capture the bridge over the Rhine and advance on the Ruhr district.

"Herr Field Marshal, I strongly urge that the bridges at Nijmegen and Arnhem be immediately destroyed", he said.

Model was amazed at Bittrich's claim – even in his wildest imagining he'd not envisaged such a daring Allied operation. But after getting over the shock, he addressed Bittrich firmly: "They will not be destroyed. No matter what the English plan, those bridges can be defended. No. Absolutely not. The bridges are not to be blown."

Without further hesitation, Bittrich put his two panzer divisions into action. The 9th (*Hohenstaufen*) was ordered to destroy the landed troops: "Quick action is imperative," Bittrich stressed. "The taking and securing of the Arnhem bridge is of decisive importance."

Meanwhile, the 10th (*Frundsberg*) Division was ordered to move towards Nijmegen immediately "to take, hold and defend the city's bridges".

Landing was too far from the bridge

"It's all too good to be true," thought one paratrooper when, immediately after landing, he found that virtually everyone had apparently come down safely – and in the right place. One had even jumped with his pet hen, which he was now in the process of caressing and showing off. Another – a lieutenant colonel – had broken his ankle on landing and was now being transported around by wheelbarrow. But the Germans were nowhere to be seen, so the units could assemble in good order, empty their gliders of weapons, stores and jeeps, and set off on their journey to the bridges they'd been given the task of capturing.

Those given the most important (and dangerous) assignment were the British 1st Airborne Division, tasked with capturing the bridge at Arnhem. The division was led by General Roy Urquhart, who had wanted to land his troops virtually on the bridge, given its position 100 kilometres behind enemy lines. But the problem was that the area near the bridge was unsuitable for landing. South of the bridge lay marshland with numerous ditches and canals, while just north of the bridge lay Arnhem itself.

Instead, the division had landed on the dry land at Ginkel Heath and Reyers-Camp. It was an excellent landing site, with one major drawback: they were 10-15 kilometres from the bridge, which meant that the element of surprise was lost. Troops would spend at least five hours reaching their targets, and while they were fighting through enemy territory, it gave Germans time to prepare countermeasures.

German field marshal **Walter Model** to SS general Wilhelm Bittrich shortly after the attack.

"They almost got me! They were after the headquarters. Imagine! They almost got me!"

Armoured support would be delayed

Shortly after the landings at 14.35, the first units from XXX Corps rolled out of Belgium, heading towards the Dutch border and Arnhem. But as soon as the first of the 50,000 men in their armoured cars and tanks had crossed the border, they encountered unexpectedly fierce resistance. On both sides ▶

TOPFOTO/SCANPIX

TOPFOTO/SCANPIX

Allied transport aircraft ejected endless groups of paratroopers, while the Horsa gliders found their landing sites. The aircraft were then emptied of their weapons and jeeps.

ULLSTEIN BILD

Field Marshal Model organises German resistance together with Bittrich (centre).

"90 per cent successful"

The Allies' attempt to capture the Arnhem crossings led to more losses than the Normandy landings.

Bernard Montgomery ruled Operation Market Garden "90 per cent successful" because the Allies captured eight of the planned nine bridges. But the target itself – to take the Arnhem Bridge and establish a springboard across the Rhine – was a failure. In addition, the operation came with major losses: half the 35,000 men were killed, wounded, captured or reported missing. By comparison, after D-Day the total losses were under 12,000.

of the narrow single-carriageway, the German *Kampfgruppe Walther* lay in wait, and after a few minutes of intense fire-fighting, nine British tanks lay destroyed. The tanks blocked the road and slowed down the entire column – only after three hours did XXX Corps succeed in making the road safe.

The delay disturbed Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks, who'd estimated his tanks should have been able to travel the 20 kilometres to Eindhoven in two – no more than three – hours. It was an ominous omen – by the end of day one they'd only managed to advance ten kilometres. It left them a long way from Arnhem and tormented Horrocks, who repeatedly stressed to his men the importance of reaching their destination in 48 hours.

Across the river without oars

The landing had been a success, but now anything that could go wrong did. The radio equipment tasked with keeping the forces in contact didn't work, a fatal failure in a situation where communication was key. It meant nobody had an overview of the situation, no one group knew what the others were doing, and each division would be left to its own devices during the most critical period of battle.

And then there were the Germans. Beforehand, no one had expected resistance, but now it was clear the enemy's fighting abilities had been catastrophically underestimated, and that new German forces were continuously flowing in. In Nijmegen, a reconnaissance unit from the 9th SS Panzer Division fiercely defended the railway bridge across the Waal river, where the US 82nd Airborne Division was forced to fight hard just to survive.

Almost two days behind schedule, Horrocks' troops finally rolled into Nijmegen on Tuesday 19th September – the day they'd planned to reach Arnhem. Now they attempted a frontal assault to cross its bridge, but to no avail. The Germans again responded with artillery fire and desperation grew. If the tanks were to have any chance of relieving the troops in Arnhem in good time, they would have to cross the Waal river – just under 400 metres wide – which was the last water obstacle on the road to Arnhem 18 kilometres away. The bridge had to be captured, and swiftly, before the Germans could blow it up.

"There's only one way to take this bridge", said General Gavin, commander of the US 82nd Airborne Division during a conference late on Tuesday evening. "We've got to get at it simultaneously – from both ends." He then requested any boats in Horrocks' engineering columns be brought to the river immediately.

The assault on both ends of the bridge was scheduled for 15.00 on Wednesday afternoon, but a few hours before it was due to begin, a worrying message from Arnhem was received: "Senior formation still in vicinity north end of main bridge ... Arnhem entirely in enemy hands. Request all possible steps expedite relief. Fighting intense and opposition extremely strong. Position not too good."

The message confirming the bridge's capture couldn't come quickly enough, but as some 260 men, all US paratroopers, rushed to the river it quickly appeared to be a suicide mission. None of the boats had motors, and most lacked oars, so the men had to paddle using their rifle butts, while 30 tanks on shore bombarded the German positions on the other side.

In an inferno of smoke and artillery fire, the men paddled for their lives, defenceless against the Germans who fought with heavy machine guns and mortars. Several boats were literally blown out of the water and the men found themselves zigzagging past dead and mutilated bodies that were piling up on the surface. Only half the boats made it to the opposite shore but, despite the bloodbath, some of the men started rowing back to pick up the next wave of troops.

Confused and bleeding, the paratroopers staggered ashore, weighed down by their equipment, but feeling combative and ready to drive the Germans from their positions. By 19.00 they'd fought their way to the north end of the bridge and

TOPFOTO/SCANPIX

The lightly-armed British paratroopers were forced to seek shelter in the terrain or in Arnhem's houses.

ULLSTEIN BILD

One by one, Germans cleared British soldiers from Arnhem's houses.

ULLSTEIN BILD

The fighting around Arnhem ended with 6,450 British soldiers taken prisoner.

now the British tanks started to drive towards the southern end. Desperately, the Germans used rocket weapons to try and halt the enemy, but despite hitting two tanks, more constantly moved towards them.

Horrocks found the drama hard to watch, but at 19.15 he could breathe easily: the last bridge before Arnhem had finally fallen into Allied hands.

Bloodbath in Arnhem

By the time the vanguard of Horrocks' armoured column rolled on to Arnhem the following morning – on Thursday, 21st September, it was already far too late.

By 20.00 on the first evening of Operation Market Garden – Sunday, 17th September – Lieutenant Colonel John Frost and his 2nd Battalion had reached the Arnhem Bridge across the Rhine. Here, despite fierce opposition and heavy losses, they managed to capture the northern end of the bridge. But Frost and his men had no support holding the bridge, and it became increasingly difficult as the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions succeeded in encircling the city with a ring of tanks and artillery. Both Bittrich and Model were now actively involved – Bittrich took control of the forces at the Arnhem Bridge, while Model popped up all over the battle zones where he urged his men to resist.

The British were only lightly armed, and by the fourth day of the operation, their weapons and ammunition as well as water and medical supplies had dwindled to almost nothing. Worse still, the promised reinforcements by air were missing – the majority of the paratroopers who'd attempted to enter the city to support Frost had been mowed down by the Germans.

From the start, Frost had divided his forces among 18 houses near the bridge but, one by one, the buildings were shelled to smoking ruins. Inside the bodies were piling up, with the survivors forced to seek refuge in the basements as the shells exploded above them. At its peak, the battalion's strength in Arnhem numbered 700 men, but after three days only 150 were left to resist the overwhelming German forces. Every moment Frost prayed the armoured column would come to their rescue, and even in his darkest moments he refused to surrender. The Germans had sent in a captured British solder with an ultimatum: surrender or die. His answer was short and sharp: "Tell them to go to hell."

As Horrocks' armoured forces were capturing the bridge at Nijmegen on the Wednesday, Frost was seriously wounded. A mortar shell exploded, lifting him into the air and then smashing him into the ground face first. Semi-conscious, he was carried down to the basement with the other wounded. Here, doctors worked in the glow of flashlights to try and patch their patients up.

Outside, all hell had broken loose. German tanks moved down the streets firing indiscriminately to the left and right. By nightfall, Arnhem was ablaze. A crowd of British soldiers who took refuge in a school looked on terrified as the building was riddled with bullets and shells. Blood flowed everywhere in the classrooms and on the stairs, and then suddenly the building began to creak ominously. At the last minute – just before the school collapsed into rubble – the soldiers fled.

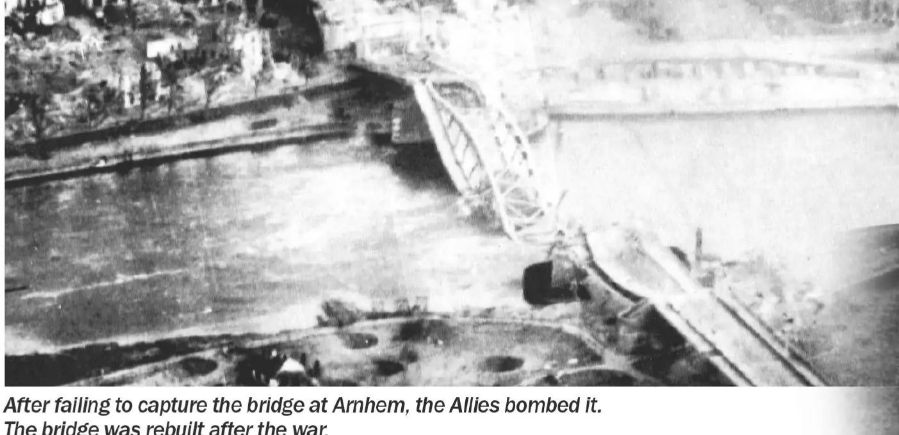
At 09.00 on Thursday, 21st September, the final remnants of opposition were mopped up. From sunrise, German panzer troops had been clearing out the occupied houses, and although the British fought defiantly, they were finally overwhelmed. They had run out of ammunition and were surrounded by Germans on all sides. The battle for Arnhem had been lost, and the Nazis had full control of the bridge once more.

Fighting continued for another four days but, for the Allies, it was now simply a case of getting their remnants back across the Rhine. Montgomery's operation had ended in terrible failure, and when silence descended once again over Arnhem and the surrounding area on Tuesday 26th September 1944, the inhabitants were forced to continue living under Nazi oppression. Only on 14th April 1945 would the Allies finally succeed in liberating the city.

"The airborne forces at Arnhem were dropped too far away from the vital objective – the bridge ... I take the blame for this mistake."

British field marshal **Bernard Montgomery** in his memoirs after World War II.

TOPFOTO/SCANPIX



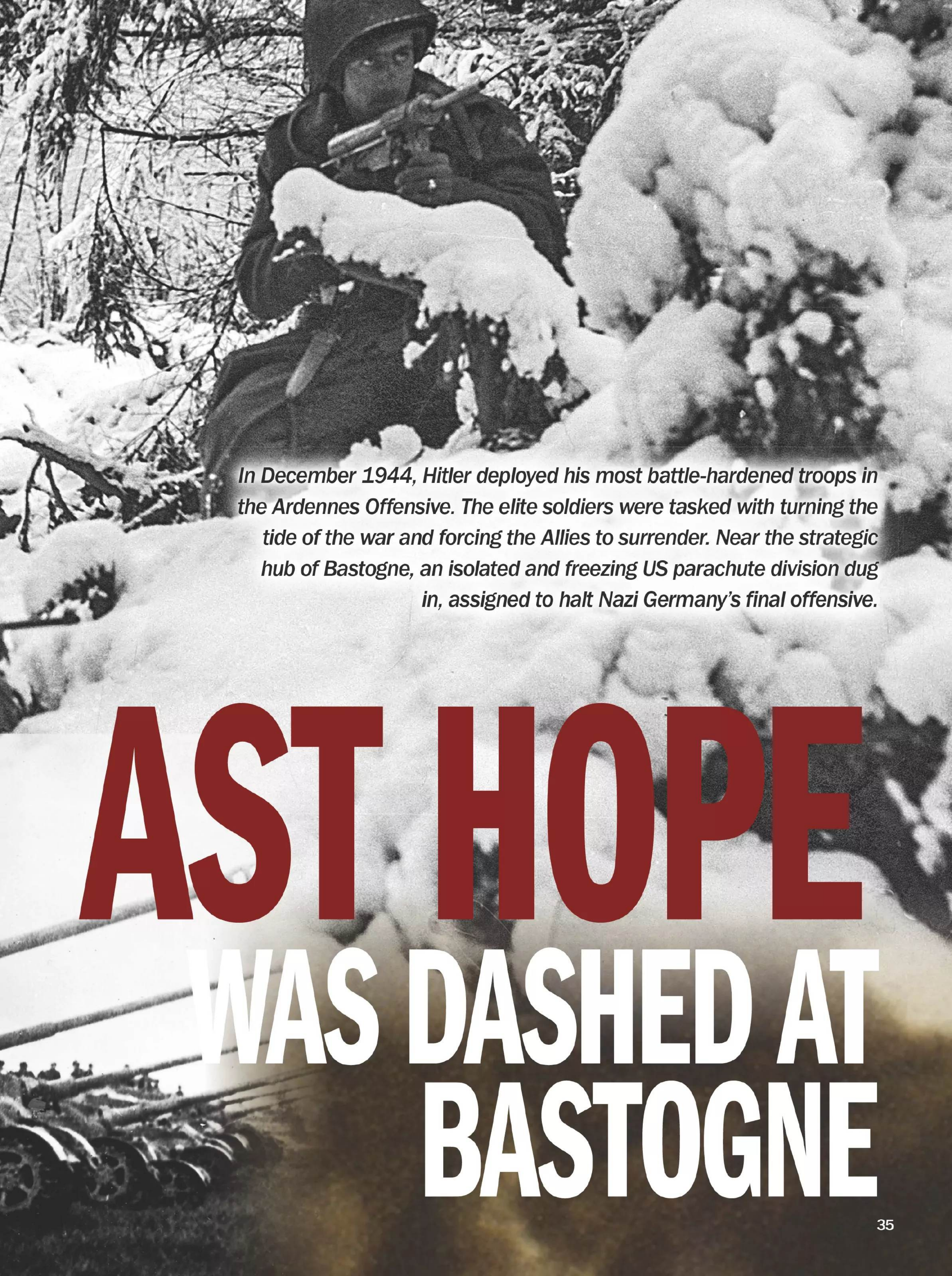
After failing to capture the bridge at Arnhem, the Allies bombed it. The bridge was rebuilt after the war.

THE RHINE/1944

BELGIUM
BASTOGNE
FRANCE

Hostile armies stood ready to invade Nazi Germany in the winter of 1944-1945. Hitler had enough troops for one last counter-attack, which he directed against the Allies in the West. With the Ardennes Offensive, he aimed to force them into making peace.

HITLER'S L



In December 1944, Hitler deployed his most battle-hardened troops in the Ardennes Offensive. The elite soldiers were tasked with turning the tide of the war and forcing the Allies to surrender. Near the strategic hub of Bastogne, an isolated and freezing US parachute division dug in, assigned to halt Nazi Germany's final offensive.

AST HOPE WAS DASHED AT BASTOGNE

BY ESBEN MØNSTER-KJÆR

The sergeants' shouts echoed through the dark December night as they tried to herd the freezing US soldiers into two columns. Moments later, the company set off down the road toward Bastogne, lit only by the moonlight on the frost-covered ground.

Somewhere ahead, gunfire and explosions echoed – a fierce battle raged. The Germans, thought to be near collapse, had suddenly launched a devastating attack, punching a massive hole in the American front.

The paratroopers of the 101st Airborne were more concerned with the cold. They'd come straight from a heated camp behind the lines, expecting rest and training until spring 1945. Now, they were being thrust towards the front without woollen underwear or thick socks.

As the shivering, dejected column advanced, a disorganised crowd emerged ahead – survivors from shattered units fleeing the enemy.

"Run! Run! They'll murder you! They'll kill you! They've got everything! Tanks, machine guns, air power, everything," the retreating men shouted in panic.

The chilling words temporarily distracted the paratroopers from the cold, replaced by a deeper dread. "Where's the ammo? We can't fight without ammo!" one soldier cried. Sent off with only a few magazines each – some even without weapons, their rifles still in repair – they scrambled into the fleeing crowd, scavenging cartridges and grenades.

The terrified refugees, keen to avoid being forced back to the front, eagerly gave up their ammunition. Minutes later, the paratroopers had taken all they could carry. The column re-formed, and the march towards Bastogne resumed.

However, they had too few rounds, and the biting frost was creeping back into their bones, clad only in thin uniforms under basic coats. Weeks would pass before they felt warmth again. Ahead lay Bastogne – a frozen hell of steel and blood.

War was not over after all

Hitler had lost. Everyone in the American army knew it. Battle-hardened veterans focused only on surviving the final months until the war ended.

The troops were preparing for a cold but peaceful Christmas in the Belgian Ardennes when a sudden offensive swept over them. On 15th December 1944, German armoured divisions easily broke through the thinly spread forces holding the American front line.

Unit after unit was wiped out by advancing tanks, while Allied air forces remained grounded due to poor weather. The Americans desperately needed time, and every soldier on the front line was ordered to stand fast and fight to the last man.

Meanwhile, troops behind the front were urgently mobilised to slow the German onslaught. Staff officers quickly turned to the 101st Airborne Division – nearly 12,000 men, recovering after six gruelling months of combat.

The so-called Screaming Eagles, named after their uniform patch, had parachuted into Normandy on D-Day and spent the summer locked in brutal close combat with the Germans. That autumn, they had operated in the Netherlands and had only been pulled from the front lines in late November.

The troops were enjoying a well-earned rest, with many on leave in Paris, when trucks arrived at their camp on 18th December. Before dawn the next morning, the disorientated paratroopers were dropped deep in the Belgian Ardennes.

Their mission was to take up positions around the provincial town of Bastogne, where strategically important roads intersected. The division was ordered to hold at all costs until reinforcements could arrive to push the Germans back.

"Now don't get yourself surrounded," was the final warning from the commander of the 101st Division as he

Americans' tank destroyers

TURBOSQUID

The bazooka was for close combat

The rocket weapon could be operated by a single man, but it was weak and inaccurate. A soldier had to get close to have a reasonable chance of hitting the target.

Rocket launcher M9 bazooka	
Effective range:	30 metres
Penetration power:	102-mm armour

Allies missed the threat

Before the German offensive in the Ardennes Forest, US troops reported hearing intense activity behind enemy lines. The message was relayed to senior generals, but no action was taken, as the reports contradicted the prevailing assessment of the situation at US headquarters.

Radio silence concealed the offensive

In 1944, the Allies had cracked German codes and could monitor enemy radio communications. However, no intercepted messages hinted at an offensive, as German units were strictly ordered not to mention the attack over the radio.

Hitler's army was doomed

By winter 1944, intelligence experts believed the German army no longer had the strength for offensive operations. "Let them come," a US general remarked upon hearing rumours of German attack preparations, convinced the enemy could muster only a small fighting force.

1,400 German tanks attacked the Americans on 16th December 1944.

HAMANN/BARCH 146-1975-102-12A

departed for Bastogne in a jeep. It would soon become clear that holding the town and keeping their rear secure was an impossible task.

Bastogne was full of civilians

The first freezing paratroopers passed through Bastogne in the early hours of 19th December, heading off to dig in across the woods and fields east of the town. Some residents had risen early to hand out food and warm drinks to the passing troops, while others prepared for the possibility of their town being occupied by the Germans once again.

When the Americans had liberated Bastogne two months earlier, a young man had painted "Welcome" in large letters across his family's house. Now, he was frantically scrubbing the paint off the white facade.

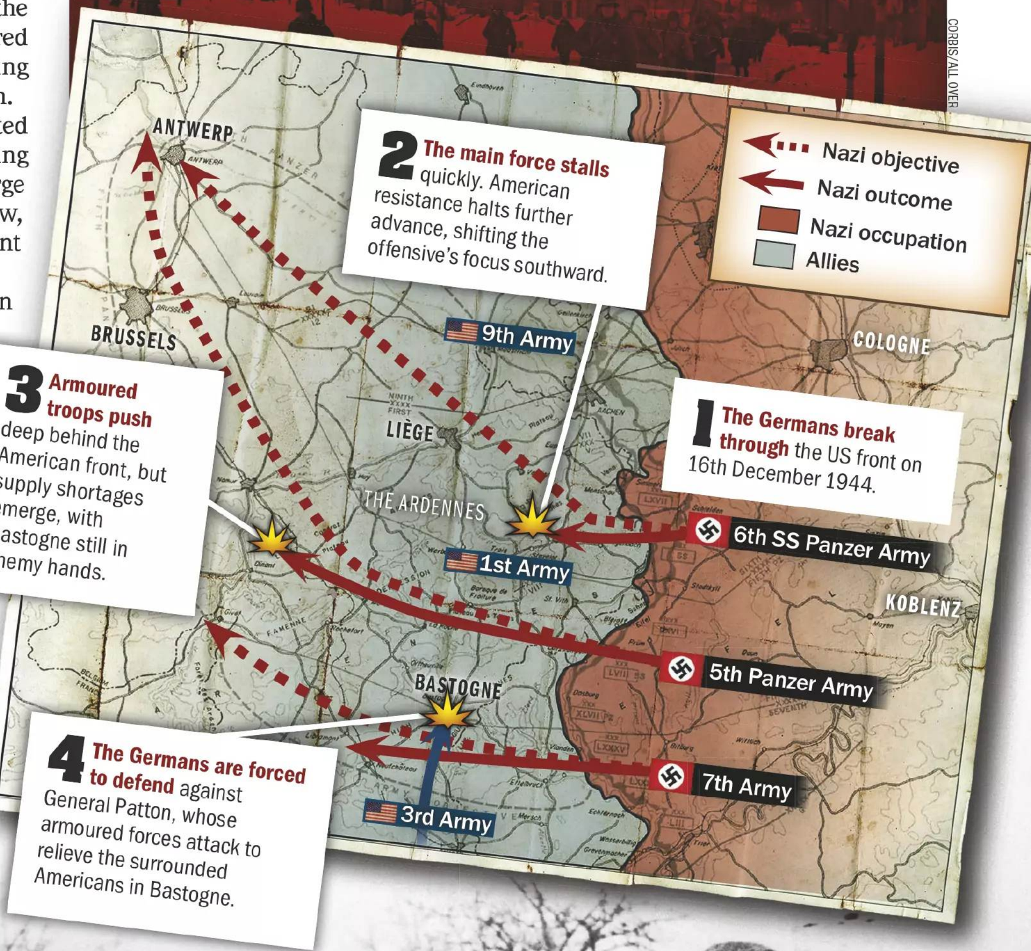
Meanwhile, a caravan of men cycled west out of the town. Some were members of the Belgian resistance who, should the Germans have returned, faced the risk of being sent to concentration camps. Others fled out of fear of being conscripted for forced labour in Germany.

Most, however, were too stunned to leave while the roads were still open. Once the reality set in for the roughly 3,000 residents, they hauled ▶

Hitler aimed for the Channel

The Ardennes Offensive aimed to bring German tanks to Antwerp within four days. If Hitler captured the port city, the Allied armies in Europe would be split in two and quickly run out of vital supplies.

CORBIS/ALL OVER



1 The Germans break through the US front on 16th December 1944.

2 The main force stalls quickly. American resistance halts further advance, shifting the offensive's focus southward.

3 Armoured troops push deep behind the American front, but supply shortages emerge, with Bastogne still in enemy hands.

4 The Germans are forced to defend against General Patton, whose armoured forces attack to relieve the surrounded Americans in Bastogne.

In the first days of the Ardennes Offensive, German forces inflicted heavy losses on the Americans.

CORBIS/ALL OVER

mattresses and food into their cellars to prepare for what was coming.

The Americans weren't confident they could keep the Germans out of Bastogne. The commander of the 101st Airborne Division, General Anthony McAuliffe, set up his headquarters in an old Belgian barracks but avoided moving into the main building. That would be the first place the Germans would look for him and his staff if they broke through into the town. Instead, the general established himself in a modest side building. Outside, a heavily armed armoured vehicle stood guard, ready to take on any advancing German tanks.

Shovelling to stop the Germans

While the division staff pinned up maps in Bastogne, the troops moved towards their positions in woods and fields. For seasoned veterans, the outlook was grim.

Captain Richard Winters, with his paratrooper battalion, was positioned north-east of the town. His 600 men had other US units to their left but faced a gaping hole in the front line on their right. He believed the battalion must be in the wrong place and sent a runner back to headquarters to clarify. The reply confirmed they were exactly where they should be. It was up to Winters to figure out how to prevent the Germans from exploiting the gap and flanking their positions.

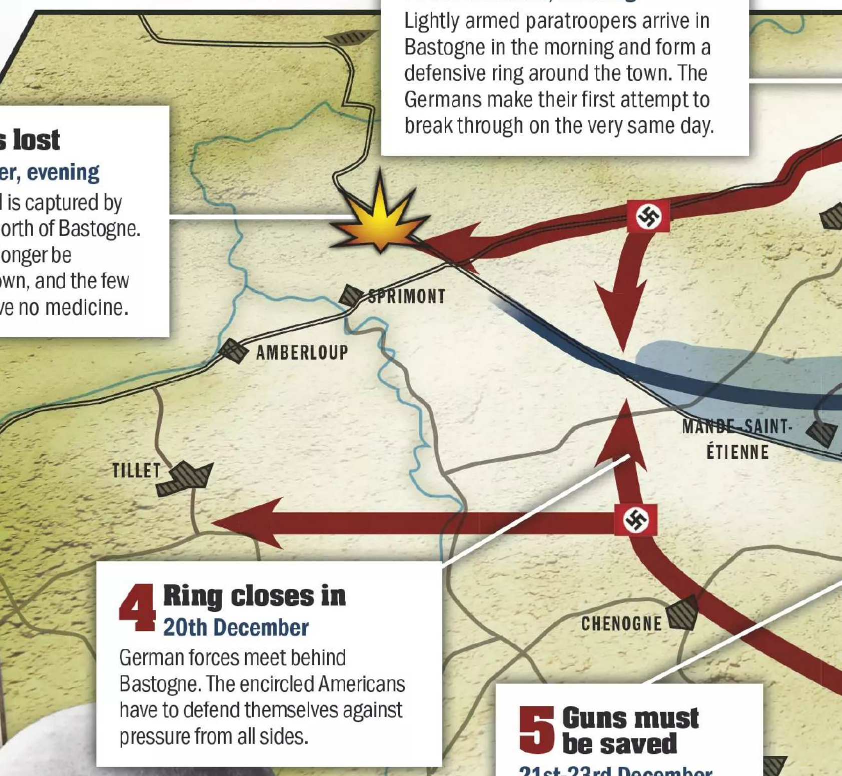
Shovels and picks bit into the frozen ground as the soldiers dug the foxholes that would be their homes for weeks. The work was gruelling, but fear kept them going. Just a few kilometres away, they could hear the intense fighting of US units on desperate missions to delay the

Bastogne was to be defended at all costs

US paratroopers stood in the way of Hitler's armoured forces near Bastogne. Their orders were to fight to the last man to prevent the Germans from using the strategically important roads through the town. Christmas became freezing cold and bloody.

German soldiers hoped that their counteroffensive could decide the war.

CORBIS/ALL OVER



2 Paratroopers move in

19th December, morning

Lightly armed paratroopers arrive in Bastogne in the morning and form a defensive ring around the town. The Germans make their first attempt to break through on the very same day.

3 Hospital is lost

19th December, evening

The US's field hospital is captured by Germans advancing north of Bastogne. The wounded can no longer be evacuated from the town, and the few remaining doctors have no medicine.

4 Ring closes in

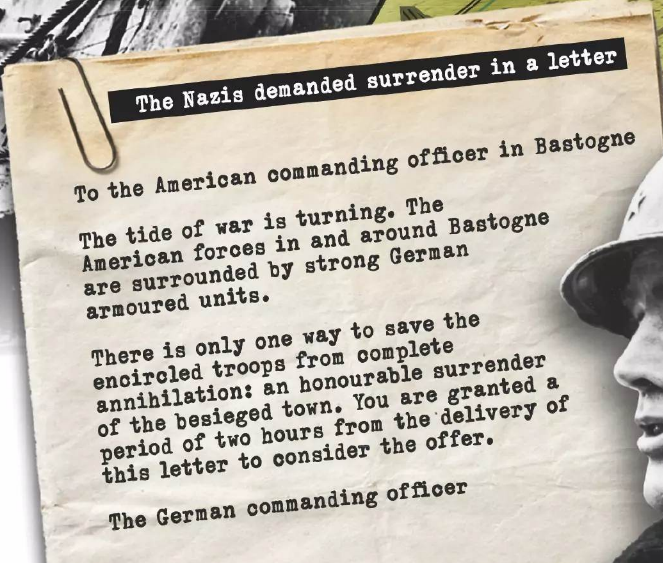
20th December

German forces meet behind Bastogne. The encircled Americans have to defend themselves against pressure from all sides.

5 Guns must be saved

21st-23rd December

Constant German attacks threaten the area where the American artillery is positioned. Troops have to be called in to assist from other points.



The Nazis demanded surrender in a letter

To the American commanding officer in Bastogne

The tide of war is turning. The American forces in and around Bastogne are surrounded by strong German armoured units.

There is only one way to save the encircled troops from complete annihilation: an honourable surrender of the besieged town. You are granted a period of two hours from the delivery of this letter to consider the offer.

The German commanding officer

Nuts!*
– the Americans' reply to the letter.

**The Germans didn't understand General McAuliffe's brief reply. An officer had to explain that it meant "No!"*

GETTY IMAGES

Germans. These forward posts were doomed to fall, but their sacrifice bought the paratroopers a day to fortify their positions. On 19th December, the Germans attempted only one push toward Bastogne, met with devastating fire from US artillery batteries, which had arrived alongside the paratroopers. However, the barrage consumed a lot of shells, which would soon become scarce.

Front was riddled with gaps

At dawn on 20th December, the paratroopers around Bastogne knew they were being encircled. However, the Americans still had no clear idea of where the enemy troops were in the forested landscape.

Captain Winters was among the trees with two enlisted men when he spotted a lone German soldier. The man stopped, pulled down his trousers, and crouched. The Americans remained perfectly still, waiting for the unsuspecting enemy to finish relieving himself. Then Winters spoke in his school-taught German: "Come over here." The German soldier ▶

Americans' tank destroyers

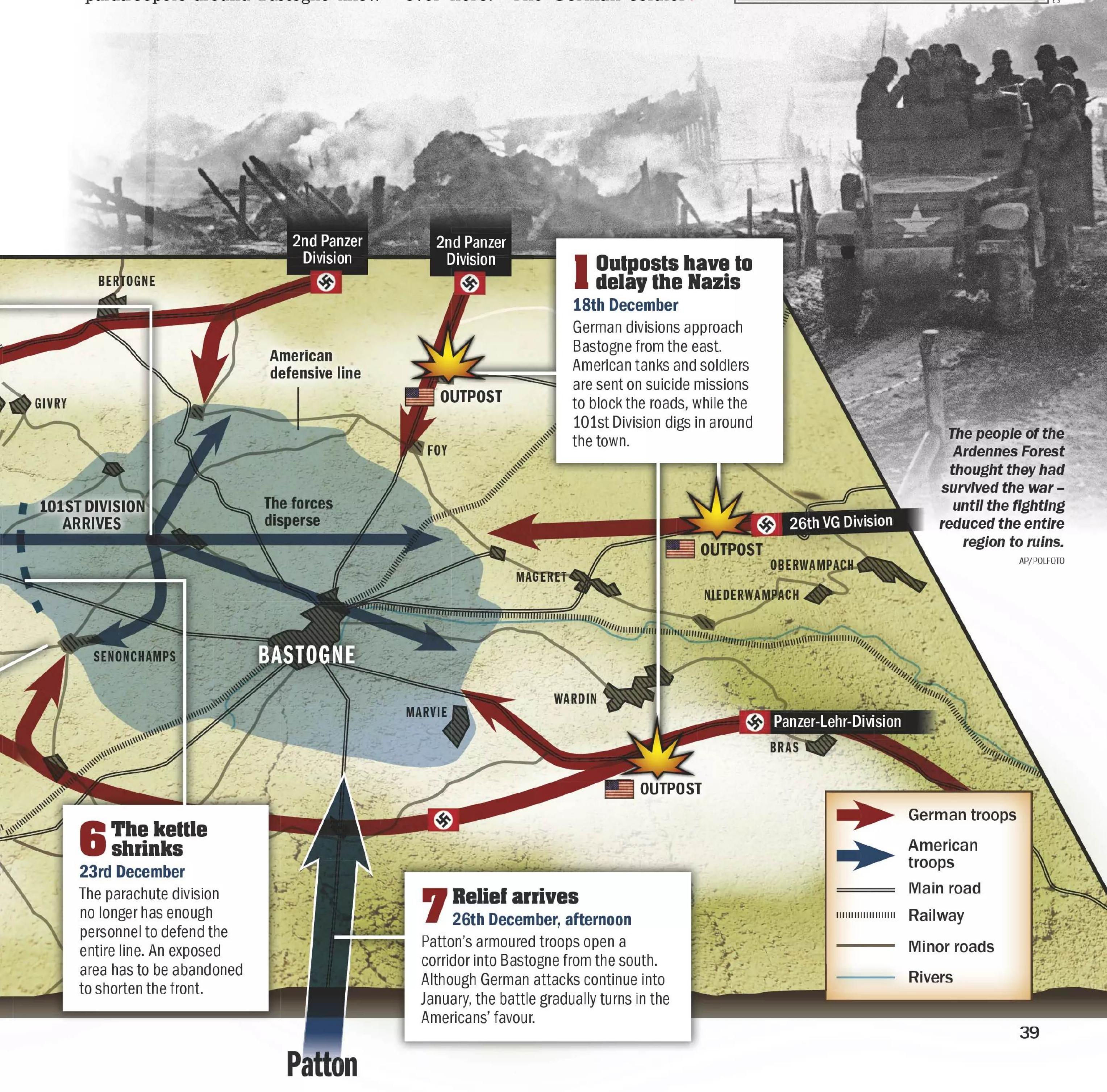
The standard weapon was too small

The US Army used the British 57-mm anti-tank gun, which could be moved by a small crew. However, by 1944, it struggled to match the armour of the latest German tanks.

M1 57 mm anti-tank gun

Effective range:	**1,000 metres**
Penetration power:	**64-mm armour**

SRDAN POPOVIC



The people of the Ardennes Forest thought they had survived the war – until the fighting reduced the entire region to ruins.

AP/POLFOTO

2nd Panzer Division
2nd Panzer Division
BERTOGNE
GIVRY
American defensive line
OUTPOST
FOY
101ST DIVISION ARRIVES
The forces disperse
26th VG Division
OUTPOST
OBERWAMPACH
MAGERET
NIEDERWAMPACH
SENONCHAMPS
BASTOGNE
WARDIN
MARVIE
Panzer-Lehr-Division
BRAS
OUTPOST
Patton
German troops
American troops
Main road
Railway
Minor roads
Rivers

1 Outposts have to delay the Nazis

18th December

German divisions approach Bastogne from the east. American tanks and soldiers are sent on suicide missions to block the roads, while the 101st Division digs in around the town.

6 The kettle shrinks

23rd December

The parachute division no longer has enough personnel to defend the entire line. An exposed area has to be abandoned to shorten the front.

7 Relief arrives

26th December, afternoon

Patton's armoured troops open a corridor into Bastogne from the south. Although German attacks continue into January, the battle gradually turns in the Americans' favour.

surrendered immediately, but Captain Winters was furious. "Here is a German soldier, in the light of early dawn, who went to take a crap, got turned around in the woods, walked through our lines, past the company CP and ended up behind the battalion CP! That sure was some line of defence we had that first night!"

The Americans themselves struggled to navigate the terrain. Private Heffron, from Winters's battalion, was making his way with a comrade back to the front line after retrieving first aid supplies. Suddenly, he fell into a hole where something moved.

"Hinkle? Hinkle, is that you?" came a German voice from below. Heffron shot out of the hole and sprinted back, screaming hysterically, "Hinkle my ass!" Both Americans made it safely back to their foxholes, and for weeks afterwards, Heffron's comrades often teased him, asking how Hinkle was doing.

Best soldiers were gone

On the same day, 20th December, German tanks and soldiers attempted to break through into Bastogne with a lightning attack. It was repelled, but more furious assaults followed from the east throughout the day.

The US paratroopers held their positions with the help of a small reserve of tanks and, most importantly, artillery. The cannons unleashed deadly barrages on the roads the German troops were advancing along, and by sunset, the pressure eased.

The Germans would not waste more time and troops attempting to storm Bastogne, so they instead laid siege to the town while the main force continued west. This strategic choice likely saved the 101st Division from annihilation, as the battles had already depleted a large portion of their shell supply. Another concentrated push might have broken through into Bastogne.

Instead of tank assaults, snow began to fall. By 21st December, visibility was reduced to just a few metres, and a thick white blanket covered the Ardennes forests. However, the snowfall did not pause the war, as General McAuliffe wanted to know where the Germans were establishing positions. Patrols were sent out to investigate and return with prisoners.

In Captain Winters's battalion, a company of around 40 men prepared to advance. The unit was no longer the same highly trained team that had parachuted into Normandy six months earlier. Half of the men had only been with the battalion for a short time, and the same went for their young lieutenant. When the experienced sergeants asked about the plan, the officer had no answer. "You'll know more of what you're going to do when we reach the woods," he said, evasively. The sergeants had a bad feeling as the company began to move forwards through the snow.

The groups quickly lost contact with each other and their scouts. They blindly trudged through the snowdrifts until a machine-gun burst suddenly felled two men. A furious firefight ensued. The sergeants shouted for orders from the platoon leader, but he seemed to have vanished. They then ordered their men to fall back.

The patrol returned with no prisoners and two fewer men. An exhausting trench warfare began in the bitter cold.

Winter showed no mercy

The Americans on the front line lived in foxholes, measuring 180 cm by 60 cm. In the cramped space, two men had to squeeze together, sleeping close enough to exchange body heat.

The paratroopers were constantly freezing without proper winter gear, which hadn't been issued before they were hurriedly sent from their camp to Bastogne. Open fires were also prohibited at the front, so soldiers couldn't warm themselves by a fire or cook the canned food from their rations. Each night, the ▶

The US troops in Bastogne lacked woollen underwear, thick socks and blankets to withstand the frost.

PHOTOSHOT/POLFOTO

Americans' tank destroyers

The M18 Hellcat tank destroyer – for firefighting

The tank destroyer had thinner armour than a proper tank and no roof on its turret. However, it was fast and could be deployed at the front at short notice.

M18 Hellcat	
Effective range:	1,000 metres
Penetration power:	109-mm armour

BENZENE

> *"The danger of being killed or maimed imposes a strain so great that it causes men to break down. Thus, psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in warfare."*

Report from US military psychiatrists, published after the war.

temperature dropped further, and some soldiers gave up trying to sleep entirely. Instead, they sat and fantasised about their future if they made it out of Bastogne and survived the rest of the war. One sergeant in Winters's battalion developed a habit of singing through the night, much to the annoyance of the men in the neighbouring foxholes.

In addition to the cold, the soldiers fought constant fear. German artillery fired regularly, and the foxholes provided little protection when shells exploded in the pine trees above. The rain of metal and wood splinters inevitably caused new casualties.

American artillery only responded during the first few days of the siege. Then, ammunition ran out, and the last few shells were saved for a German breakthrough. The supply of rifle and machine-gun ammunition also dwindled at an alarming rate. But as long as the clouds and snow obscured the sky, planes couldn't drop supplies.

Some soldiers fought the temptation to shoot themselves in the foot. Wounded soldiers couldn't be evacuated from Bastogne, but at least they would escape the front line, get shelter, and have warm meals. However, only a few chose this desperate escape, and even soldiers with frostbite stayed at their posts.

"If all the men who had a legitimate reason to leave the MLR [main line of resistance] and go back to the aid station in Bastogne had taken advantage of their situation, there just would not have been a front line," Captain Winters remarked. Instead, the men froze as they waited for the next German attack.

Christmas was no celebration

After the initial battles outside Bastogne, the German besiegers kept the Americans under constant pressure. Snipers lay in wait, ready to shoot any American who dared to peek over the edge of their foxhole.

Meanwhile, German patrols snuck through gaps in the defensive ring, and paratroopers had to be gathered from several units to drive the intruders out again. Small attacks took place daily

Americans' tank destroyers

Heavy artillery was the last resort

The powerful field guns were designed to bombard distant targets from positions behind the front. If the Germans broke through, the artillery could also be used to stop tanks at close range.

M2 105-mm howitzer	
Effective range:	1,000 metres
Penetrative power:	100-mm armour

JOE WENTZEL

B teams went into battle

The Battle of Bastogne was fought between two armies, both of which had seen better days. By Christmas 1944, the best soldiers were gone.

PRISONER OF WAR

German forces were unfit for offensive warfare

In the autumn of 1944, the Nazis reduced manpower in some units, compensating by equipping them with more automatic weapons to maintain the same firepower. The new Volksgrenadier divisions were designed for defence, but at Bastogne, they were ordered to attack.

The recruits were children

Many of Germany's young men had fallen in battle, been captured or were left disabled. To address a critical manpower shortage, the Nazi regime conscripted older men and boys as young as 16 years old.

Child soldiers became a common sight among the prisoners captured by the Americans.

GETTY IMAGES

Soldiers never got a break from the war

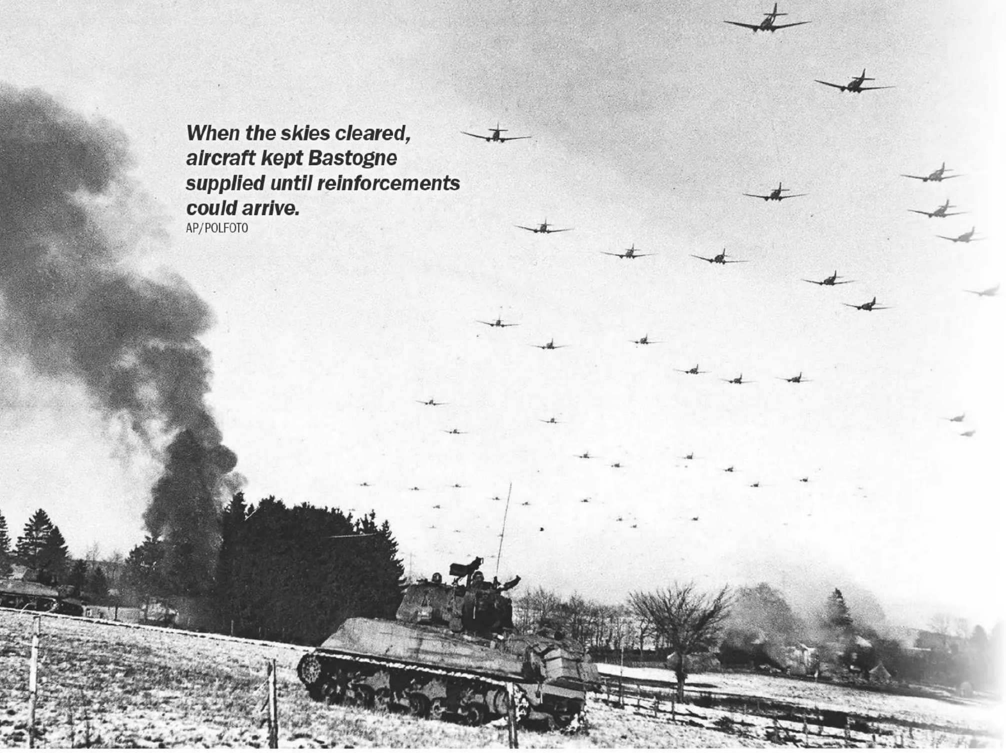
US units were immediately reinforced after losses. This meant there was no need to withdraw forces from the front lines for reorganisation, as other armies did. However, constant danger took its toll, and many veterans broke down at Bastogne.

Amateurs filled the gaps

The US Army had underestimated the number of infantrymen it needed at the start of the war. By the winter of 1944, manpower reserves were nearly exhausted, and instead of well-trained soldiers, units received new recruits with only minimal training.

Combat morale plummeted among US soldiers who were denied rest between battles.

GETTY IMAGES & TOPFOTO/POLFOTO



When the skies cleared, aircraft kept Bastogne supplied until reinforcements could arrive.

AP/POLFOTO

along the entire line, but on the afternoon of 23rd December, they grew in intensity. German tanks and soldiers charged towards the American defensive ring south of Bastogne, and several positions were overrun.

The attack continued after sunset, but the darkness enabled the Americans to get closer to the German tanks and destroy them with bazookas. At the same time, a small reinforcement force was brought in by abandoning another area, thus shortening the front line.

By the dawn of 24th December, Bastogne was still in American hands. Wounded soldiers filled the town's houses, receiving only superficial treatment from the few overwhelmed doctors and Belgian civilians.

Medicines were almost gone, and to ease the pain, the wounded were given alcohol. A soldier from Winters's battalion numbed the pain in his mangled legs with sweet green crème de menthe. The liquid still retained its emerald hue when the Luftwaffe bombed Bastogne and the shaking made him vomit into his helmet.

A direct German hit struck a building where 20 US patients and a Belgian nurse died instantly. The explosions had long ago forced General McAuliffe to move his headquarters to a cellar. There, the cooks managed to prepare a Christmas dinner with turkey. Earlier that day, he had sent a message to the troops, stating that their Christmas gift to one another was the honour of their defence of Bastogne. The soldiers on the front line would have preferred a piece of the staff's turkey. Their menu consisted of cold beans, and the only indulgence the sergeants of Winters's battalion could offer was to take the night watch at the forward posts themselves.

Reinforcements arrived

Although Christmas Eve was bitter, the soldiers in Bastogne had survived the worst of the battle. The weather cleared, and Allied bombers were finally able to attack the German positions around the town.

At the same time, supplies began to rain down in parachutes, ensuring that the 101st Division could hold out for a few more days. Bastogne remained in US hands when the relief forces, led by the famous tank general Patton, arrived on 26th December.

Initially, only a narrow corridor was opened into the town from the south. However, convoys of trucks could bring in supplies, and the wounded were finally evacuated.

News from the outside world reached the town, and the paratroopers realised that their stubborn defence had made them heroes back in the USA. General Maxwell Taylor also arrived and took command from McAuliffe, who had only been a temporary commander. The newcomer inspected the positions and began issuing commands.

"Keep a sharp eye on the trees in front of you," Taylor said to Winters. "What the hell do you think we've been doing while you were in Washington?" Captain Winters thought, angrily.

Meanwhile, Hitler's great offensive through the Ardennes had stalled. The paratroopers in Bastogne had created a roadblock that prevented supplies from reaching the German tank divisions further west.

As a reward for their efforts, the weary paratroopers expected to be relieved. But it wasn't until a few weeks later, on 17th January, that the 101st Division was finally allowed to retire from the front line.

CORBIS/ALL OVER

Transporting the dead was one of the many unpopular tasks assigned to black soldiers.

Black soldiers got the dirty work

Shortly before Bastogne was encircled by the Germans, an unusual unit made its way into the town. The soldiers of the 969th Artillery Battalion stood apart from nearly all other US combat troops by being black.

During World War II, the US Army was segregated, and African Americans were placed in units often tasked with manual labour behind the lines. They buried the dead, cooked and drove trucks. According to a military report, black soldiers were deemed unsuitable for combat because they were allegedly "irresponsible, immoral, and dishonest". However, political pressure led to a few African American combat units being sent to the front in 1944.

Beyond the army's racism, the Black artillerymen also faced Nazi racial hatred during the winter of 1944. One group was captured by SS soldiers and tortured to death.

Segregation in the US Army ended in 1948.

SHUTTERSTOCK

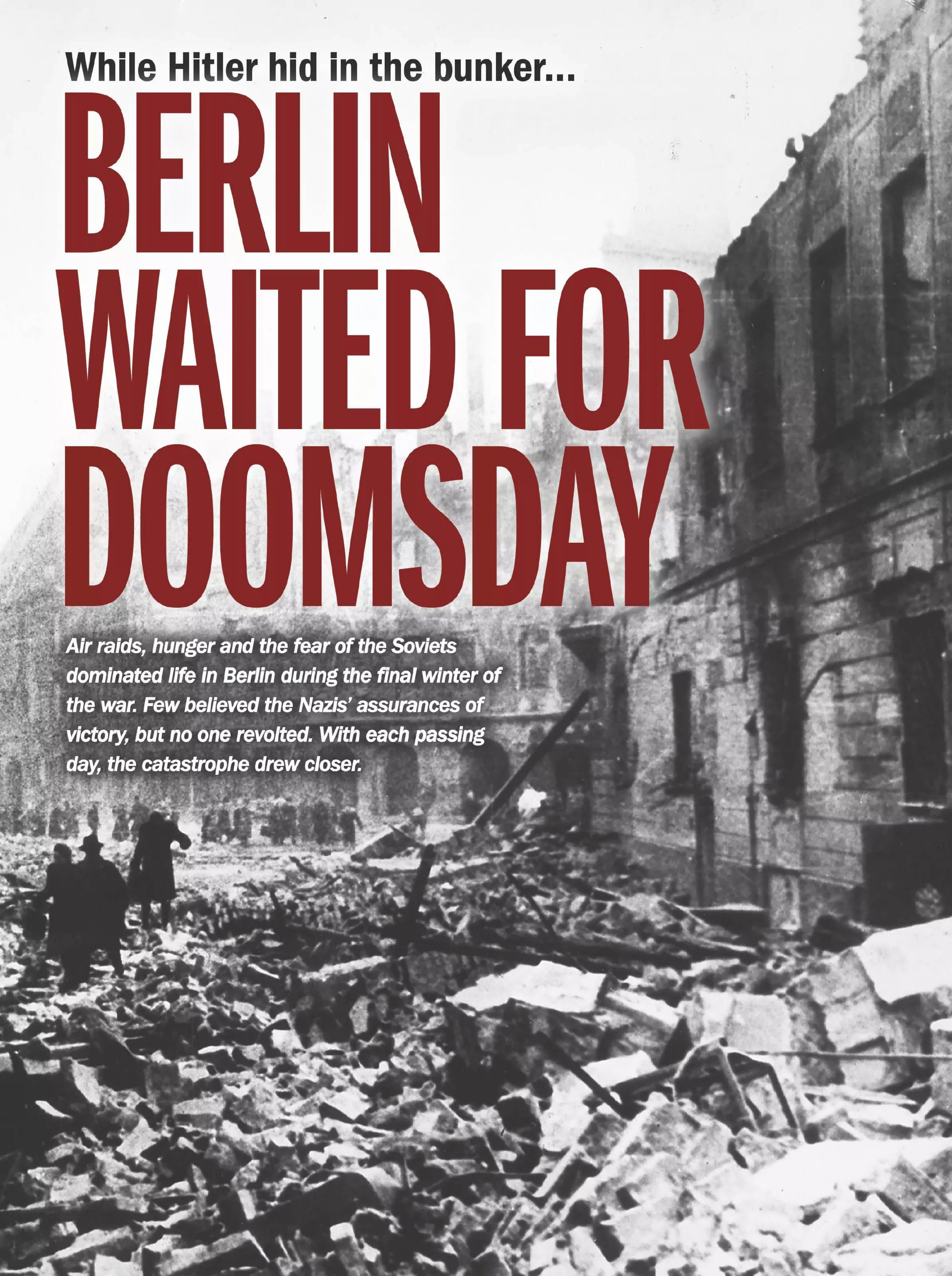
After each air raid, rubble and burned beams were strewn in the streets.

URSULA RÖHNERT/SZ PHOTO/RITZAU SCANPIX

While Hitler hid in the bunker...

BERLIN WAITED FOR DOOMSDAY

Air raids, hunger and the fear of the Soviets dominated life in Berlin during the final winter of the war. Few believed the Nazis' assurances of victory, but no one revolted. With each passing day, the catastrophe drew closer.



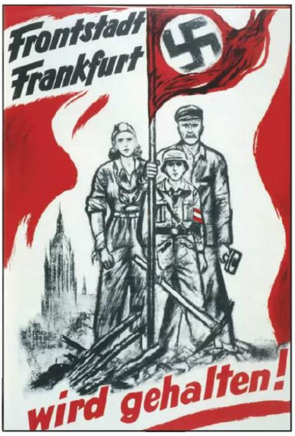
BY ESBEN MØNSTER-KJÆR AND TORSTEN WEPER

No one had heard anything from Adolf Hitler for months. He had become such a distant figure that the Germans outdid one another with wild speculations to explain the Führer's mysterious absence. One theory suggested that Hitler had gone completely mad and had to be hidden from the public.

Finally, on New Year's Day 1945, the familiar voice returned to German radios. Hitler used his speech to reassure the people that the time of trials would soon be over and that a golden future awaited.

"We are aware of what the Anglo-American statesmen plan to do with the German Reich, what measures the Bolshevik rulers and the international Jews, who in the end are behind them, plan to take against the German people," he emphasised in his characteristic Austrian accent. But thanks to Nazism, Germany would triumph, the dictator promised. And when that happened, the Reich would once again flourish. "Within a few years, the National Socialist state with its energy and initiative will rebuild all that is being destroyed today," Hitler promised. "The outward appearance of our cities will be mightier and more beautiful than ever before. Healthier homes for the German human beings will take the place of the destroyed tenement barracks."

The Führer's lofty vision was far removed from the reality Berliners witnessed daily: large parts of the city were pulverised and burned out. Each day, the Reich shrank – German factories were bombed, railway lines destroyed, and submarines sunk.



AKG IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

East of Berlin lay Frankfurt on the Oder River. The city's inhabitants solemnly promised to hold their ground against the Red Army.

Stalin's Red Army was in Poland – just 500 kilometres from Berlin – and an ominous intelligence report warned of an imminent large-scale Soviet offensive across the entire Eastern Front. Six million soldiers, 91,000 artillery pieces, and 11,000 tanks were ready.

Today's good advice: "Enjoy the war"

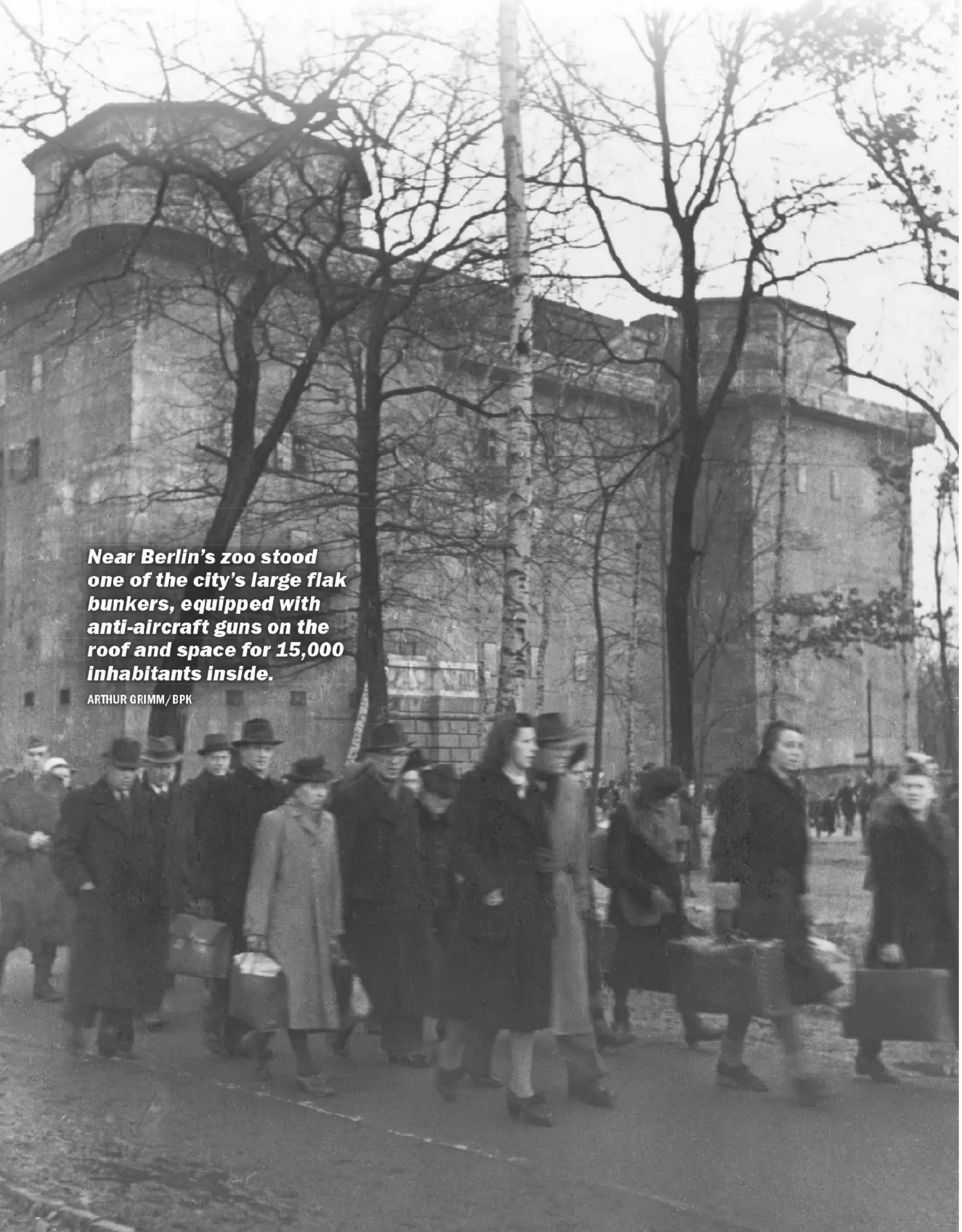
Hitler dismissed the report as "completely idiotic" and suggested that those responsible should be "locked up in an asylum". Thus, it was a total surprise when, on 12th January, the Red Army advanced across the Vistula River and, by the following week, had captured Warsaw.

Berliners watched the developments with growing anxiety, as reports of the Soviet soldiers' brutality had already preceded them – for example, when the East Prussian village of Nemmersdorf had been captured by the Red Army in October 1944. All the women had been raped and subsequently killed. "Enjoy the war – the peace will be terrible!" became a grimly humorous saying in Berlin. Another popular one was, "What keeps me going is the thought of the Nazis' downfall."

Once home to four million inhabitants, Berlin now had 2.8 million residents left – mainly women, children, the elderly and "unfit-for-service" men. Several times a week, air raid alarms woke the population, forcing them to rush to shelters – or down into their cellars – to seek safety. Everyone carried their "emergency suitcase" containing personal papers, money and a little food. The suitcase was usually kept by the front door, ready to grab at a moment's notice.

The journalist Ursula von Kardorff kept a diary during the war: "Almost every single day, there are two air raid alarms, literally on the dot – in the evening at eight o'clock and again at eleven. The message says, 'approaching over Hanover-Braunschweig' before the race to the bunkers begins."

Ursula von Kardorff's aristocratic lineage and good connections granted



Near Berlin's zoo stood one of the city's large flak bunkers, equipped with anti-aircraft guns on the roof and space for 15,000 inhabitants inside.

ARTHUR GRIMM/BPK

Russian atrocities caused German panic

The Red Army's mass rapes in a German village became a propaganda tool in Joseph Goebbels's hands.

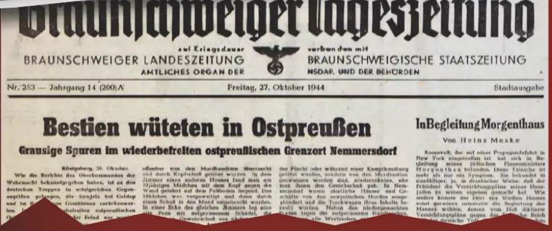
Since the attack on the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the Germans had carried out countless atrocities in the occupied territories. From 1944, the Soviets began taking revenge.

"The Germans are not human," declared a leaflet distributed among Soviet soldiers who, on 21st October, captured the East Prussian village of Nemmersdorf.

When the Germans recaptured Nemmersdorf a few days later, they witnessed a massacre. "Near a large inn, the Roter Krug, stood a barn and to each of its two doors a naked woman was nailed through the hands, in a crucified posture. In the dwellings we found a total of 72 women, including children, and one man, 74, all dead … Some babies had their heads bashed in," reported soldier Karl Potrek. All the girls and women, aged between eight and 84, had been raped.

Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels saw the massacre as an opportunity to spread fear among the Germans and motivate soldiers to make an extra effort on the Eastern Front. As a result, Nemmersdorf was thoroughly documented and investigated by an international team of experts.

Doctors and military personnel examined the 72 dead in Nemmersdorf.



Braunschweiger Tageszeitung

auf Kriegsdauer verbunden mit
BRAUNSCHWEIGER LANDESZEITUNG BRAUNSCHWEIGISCHE STAATSZEITUNG
AMTLICHES ORGAN DER NSDAP. UND DER BEHÖRDEN

Nr. 253 — Jahrgang 14 (200)A Freitag, 27. Oktober 1944 Stadtausgabe

Bestien wüteten in Ostpreußen

Grausige Spuren im wiederbefreiten ostpreußischen Grenzort Nemmersdorf

In Begleitung Morgenthaus

Von Heinz Meske

Nemmersdorf was the first village in the German Reich that the Red Army captured. "Beasts rampaged in East Prussia," wrote the German newspapers.

AKG IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX & BRAUNSCHWEIGER TAGESZEITUNG

her access to the Speer bunker, located near the Brandenburg Gate and government ministries. There, officials could seek shelter in comfortable surroundings, complete with running water and an elderly master of ceremonies recounting anecdotes from Kaiser Wilhelm's court. Occasionally, Hitler's architect and armaments minister, Albert Speer, would appear if he was in the city. "He is a calm, thoughtful man and an anti-Nazi," the 33-year-old Ursula von Kardorff noted.

For most Berliners, however, the bombings were far from an exciting break in routine or an opportunity for cultured conversation. The grossly inadequate public shelters were overcrowded, and people were trampled to death at the entrances when the first bomb blasts triggered panic in the queues. The bunkers' toilets were too few and quickly clogged – or permanently occupied by desperate individuals who locked themselves in to commit suicide.

The massive blocks of reinforced concrete withstood all bombs, but a direct hit could make them tremble, silencing any conversation in fear. When the air raid alarm was finally lifted, people rushed out to see if their homes were still standing. Sparks flew from the numerous fires, as Swiss newspaper correspondent Konrad Warner recounted: "People shouted to each other, 'They're burning! Smother the fire!' I kept running, slapping at embers on my coat and hat."

The majority of Berliners had to make do with sheltering in the cellars of their buildings. While it took only a moment to get there, these shelters were far from safe. Countless buildings collapsed during the war, burying the cellars and leaving those inside to either burn alive or slowly suffocate due to lack of oxygen, as help often took too long to arrive.

Berlin did have an efficient fire brigade, but the relentless air raids made their task impossible. Fifteen-year-old Wolfgang Pickert was a "fire watcher" – his job was to rush out and assess the damage after the first bombs fell. A couple of years earlier, he had acted quickly to save an apartment block from burning down using only a bucket and a fire beater. Now, he realised that even hardened front-line soldiers struggled to cope with the bombings in Berlin. "My father, who experienced it once, was completely shattered by nerves when the attack was over and the sirens sounded."

The cleanup of the streets was carried out by foreign forced labourers and random passers-by who were ordered to help. Among the rubble lay the dead, ▶

Berlin's firefighters battled the flames after the almost daily air raids.

ALINARI ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Hitler's last home

Metre-thick concrete protected the Führer from air strikes and artillery fire, but defeat still steadily approached.

In January 1943, it became clear that Göring's Luftwaffe couldn't defend the airspace over Berlin, so Hitler needed a secure place to stay when he was in the German capital.

Hochtief AG won the contract for project "B 207" and began by digging a 10-metre-deep hole in the Reich Chancellery garden. The bunker was constructed with four metres of reinforced concrete for the roof and walls to withstand the Allies' bombs.

By 23rd October 1944, the construction was complete, and in January 1945, Hitler began staying in the bunker. From 16th April, he lived there permanently until his death on 30th April.

Soviet demolition teams attempted, without success, to remove it in 1947 and 1959. In the 1980s, the ceiling was removed by hand. The walls and floor now lie beneath a car park.

TELEPHONE EXCHANGE

In the end, the telephone was the only contact with the outside world. The Führerbunker's phone number was 12 00 50.

This telephone was allegedly used in the Führerbunker.

PATRIK STOLLARZ/AFP/RITZAU SCANPIX

OFFICE

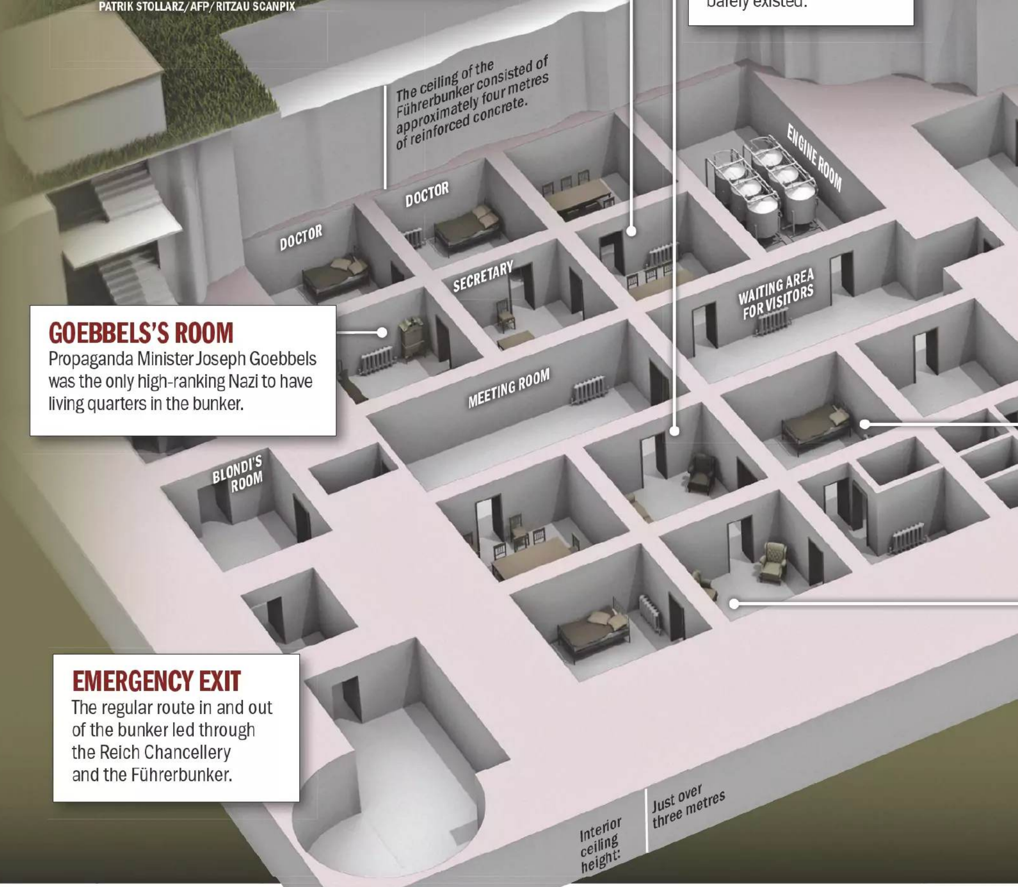
In front of the large strategy map, Hitler played commander, moving around armies that now barely existed.

GOEBBELS'S ROOM

Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels was the only high-ranking Nazi to have living quarters in the bunker.

EMERGENCY EXIT

The regular route in and out of the bunker led through the Reich Chancellery and the Führerbunker.


The ceiling of the Führerbunker consisted of approximately four metres of reinforced concrete.
DOCTOR
DOCTOR
ENGINE ROOM
SECRETARY
WAITING AREA FOR VISITORS
MEETING ROOM
BLONDI'S ROOM
Interior ceiling height:
Just over three metres

SOL 90

who had to be gathered and identified by family or neighbours.

Hitler went to Berlin

When the Red Army's large-scale offensive began at 05.00 on 12th January, Hitler was sleeping at his headquarters, Adlerhorst, near the Rhine. It was from here that he had led the failed Ardennes offensive three weeks earlier. Initially, the Soviet advance from the east was taken lightly by those in Adlerhorst. It wasn't until 12.00 that Hitler's adjutant woke him, after which the usual day's routine of meetings, a walk and a cup of tea followed.

It was the evening of the 15th when he boarded his armoured train for Berlin, completing the final stretch to the Reich Chancellery the next morning by car. Hitler seemed surprised as he drove through his destroyed capital.

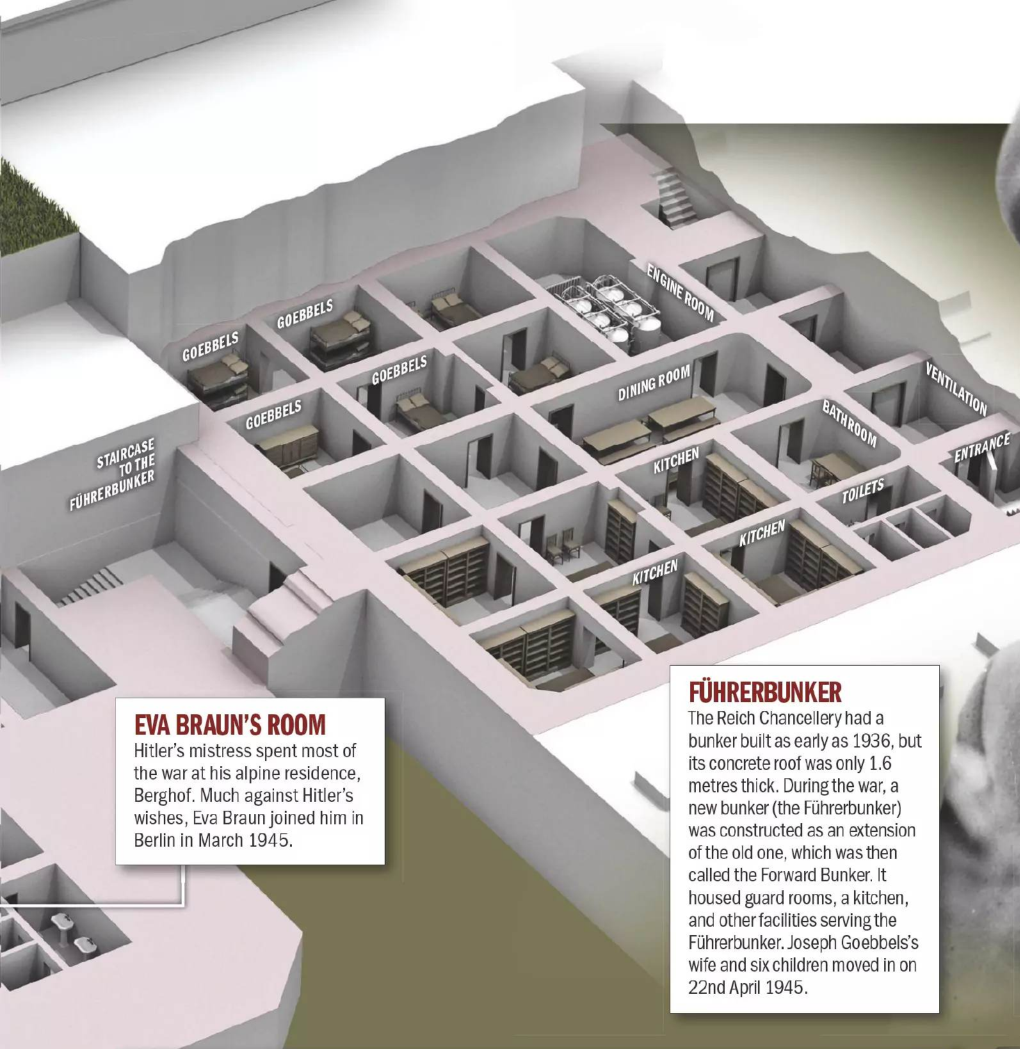
Even he wasn't spared the disruptions from air raids. For safety, he had to spend the nights in the large bunker complex, the Führerbunker, which Albert Speer had built beneath the Reich Chancellery's garden. His newly built Reich Chancellery could only be used during the day.

Meanwhile, the Red Army marched through Poland, and soon the Soviets crossed into the German province of Silesia. Ursula von Kardorff spoke to a couple from Breslau (now Wrocław), which Hitler had declared a "fortress" – meant to resist capture at all costs. They'd secured a spot on the last train out before Breslau was encircled by the Red Army.

"They told of refugees who virtually trampled each other to death, of corpses that had been thrown out from unheated good trains along the way, of treks that had got stuck on the road, of mothers who had gone crazy and would not believe that the babies they carried in their arms were already dead," von Kardorff wrote in her diary, acknowledging that she had reacted with indifference to the story. "But one is already so stupefied that one can barely imagine such ghastly scenes any more."

Boys took the place of men

While civilian Berliners huddled in bunkers and cellars, the children fought to defend



EVA BRAUN'S ROOM

Hitler's mistress spent most of the war at his alpine residence, Berghof. Much against Hitler's wishes, Eva Braun joined him in Berlin in March 1945.

FÜHRERBUNKER

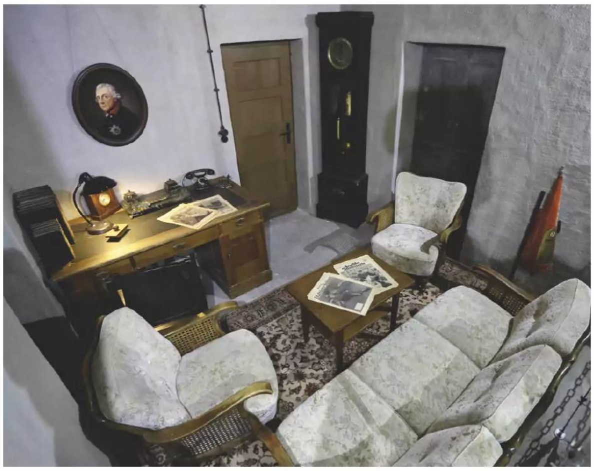
The Reich Chancellery had a bunker built as early as 1936, but its concrete roof was only 1.6 metres thick. During the war, a new bunker (the Führerbunker) was constructed as an extension of the old one, which was then called the Forward Bunker. It housed guard rooms, a kitchen, and other facilities serving the Führerbunker. Joseph Goebbels's wife and six children moved in on 22nd April 1945.

When Adolf Hitler moved into the bunker, he was a wreck.

POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

HITLER'S SITTING ROOM

In the Führerbunker, Hitler had three small rooms – a bedroom, an office and a sitting room. He usually rose late, at 11.30, and bathed before starting his tasks. The rooms were furnished with items from the Reich Chancellery in an attempt to create a cosy atmosphere, including a portrait of Frederick the Great, Hitler's role model.



The Berlin Story exhibition has recreated Hitler's sitting room in the Führerbunker.

MICHAEL SOHN/AP/RITZAU SCANPIX

their city. The anti-aircraft batteries (known as flak) had only a few adult soldiers left – most were 15-17-year-old boys from the Hitler Youth organisation. Girls from the Bund Deutscher Mädel also participated in air defence. Although the Nazis' strict gender division didn't allow women to pull the trigger, the girls operated searchlights, radar and rangefinders, and did other tasks.

In previous years, Berlin had Germany's best air defences, as each bombing raid challenged the Nazi regime's image of infallibility. Now, most anti-aircraft guns had been moved to the front, and the country's fighter pilots lacked fuel to engage the waves of Flying Fortresses and Lancaster bombers.

Apart from a few scattered anti-aircraft batteries, Berlin was protected only by its three large flak towers. Each of these enormous concrete fortifications had four twin-barrelled 128-mm anti-aircraft ▶

Berlin was badly hit

67,000 tons of bombs fell on Berlin during WWII, making it the hardest-hit German city. Explosions and fires wiped out entire neighbourhoods, leaving residents barely able to locate the streets where they once lived.

50,000 people died during air raids. The toll might have been higher if geography and architecture hadn't aided Berliners; the wide boulevards prevented flames from spreading rapidly between apartment blocks. Additionally, the city's distance from British and US airbases meant bombers had to carry lighter loads to conserve enough fuel for the return journey.

500,000 homes destroyed – nearly one in three of the capital's 1.56 million dwellings. A further 100,000 were severely damaged. In districts such as Tiergarten and Mitte, every second home was gone.

9th April 1945. Hundreds of women were conscripted to dig tank traps to stop Soviet tanks.

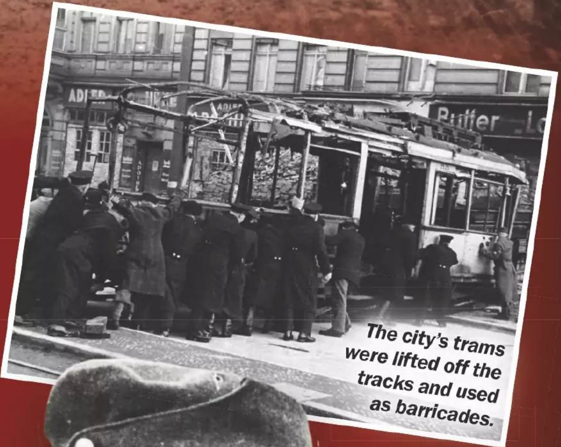
AKG IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

Berlin was to be a fortress

The code word was Operation Clausewitz, but Berlin's Nazi leadership hesitated to implement the fortification plan, fearing it would scare the population. By the time work began, it was too late.

The defence plan Operation Clausewitz involved creating defensive rings with tank trenches, fortified positions, and barricades made of trams and cobblestones to halt the Soviet advance. However, work was delayed due to the Nazis' reluctance to admit the city was in danger.

In April, 70,000 Germans, mostly women and older men, were finally conscripted to build barricades, supplemented by 17,000 French prisoners of war. But the regime couldn't provide fuel for excavators or enough barbed wire and landmines. Most of the forces were focused on the innermost ring, the Zitadelle, which surrounded the government district and the Führerbunker.

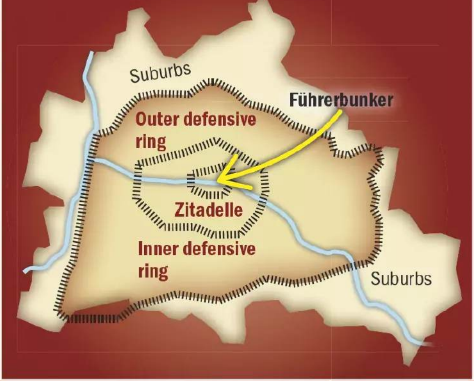


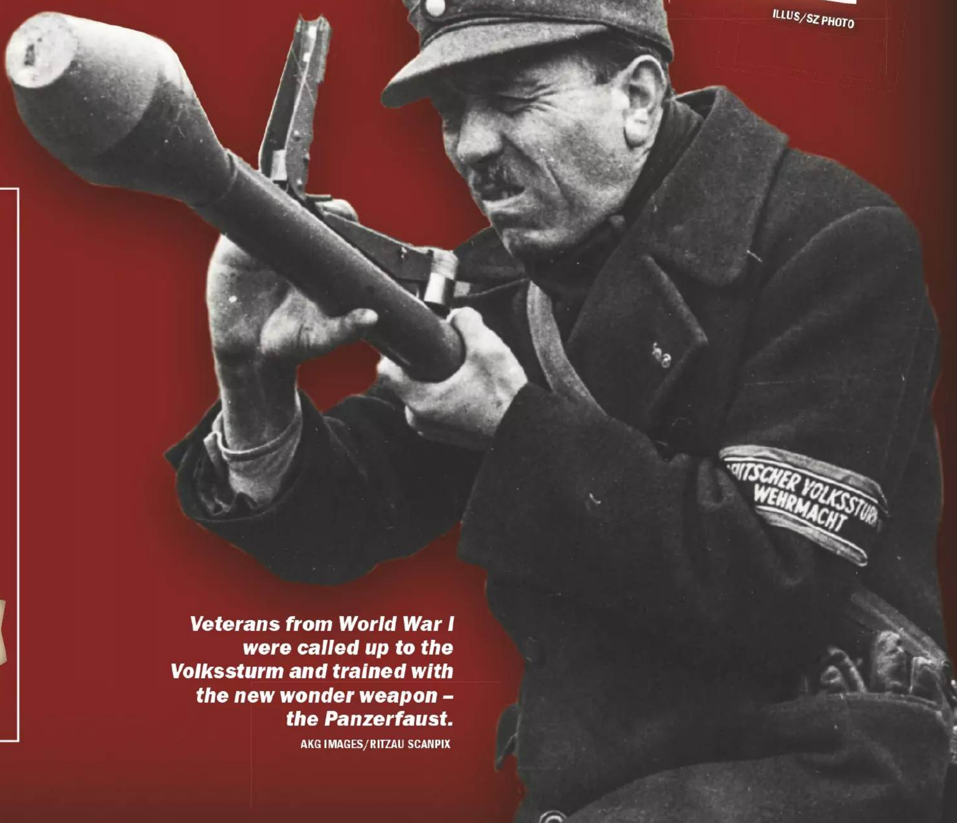
The city's trams were lifted off the tracks and used as barricades.

ILLUS/SZ PHOTO

THE THREE DEFENSIVE RINGS

The enemy had to break through three fortified lines, where Berliners had built barricades, dug trenches, and set tank traps. In reality, none of the rings were fully constructed when the attack came.





Veterans from World War I were called up to the Volkssturm and trained with the new wonder weapon – the Panzerfaust.

AKG IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

guns on the roof. These weapons were the most powerful of their kind in the German arsenal. Platforms with 20-mm and 37-mm machine guns were mounted on the sides of the buildings. Enemy planes had to pay a high price every time they passed over the towers.

When Berliners were not huddling in fear, they thought about food. Their growling stomachs reminded them that rations were small, and substitute goods rarely eased their hunger. Since the outbreak of war, the nutritional content of the German diet had dropped by 40 per cent, and the situation was even worse in the big cities.

“Even the bloody food is a load of shit!” one of Ursula von Kardorff’s colleagues at the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper raged one day. She laughed, as she later confided in her diary. The man was usually the epitome of correctness. Ursula was better off than most – she used her connections to the Ministry of Armaments, where she bought salad, sausage and rolls in the employees’ shop. She bought other necessities on the black market – like most other Berliners.

On 30th January 1945, Adolf Hitler’s voice again rang out on the radio. The occasion was the anniversary of the Nazis’ rise to power in 1933. In previous years, the day had been celebrated with torchlit parades through the city. That evening, the streets were deserted, and much of Hitler’s speech focused on Stalin’s troops, who were now advancing towards the Oder River, less than 100 km away.

“The horrid fate that is now taking shape in the east and that exterminates hundreds of thousands in the villages and market places, in the country and in the cities will be warded off in the end and mastered by us, with the utmost exertion and despite all setbacks and hard trials,” Hitler reassured.

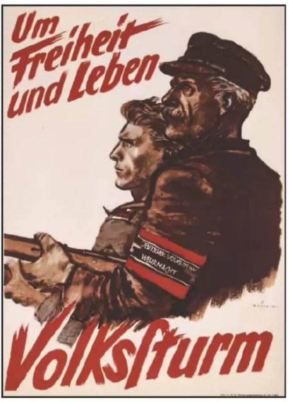
Some were still willing to believe him: “I am so hopeful about our fate,” one woman wrote to her husband, a prisoner of war in France.

“The whole country is ready to march with weapons in hand. We have secret weapons that will be used at the right moment, and above all, we have a Führer whom we can follow with our eyes closed.”

Bombing offensive intensified

The British night raids had become routine for Berliners, when, in early February, the Americans began daylight raids.

On 3rd February, 1,000 bombers targeted the railway, government buildings and the Reich Chancellery. But the civilian population wasn’t spared, as 21-year-old Ilse Schier, who had just become a mother, recounted: “The inferno began around eleven in the morning. The sky was completely dark, only the flames painted an eerie picture, and the stench of burned human bodies filled the air. Incendiary bombs ate through the rooftops, and the smoke made it impossible to breathe. Down in the subway, indescribable chaos prevailed. Crowds moved along the tracks towards a destination no one knew.”



DEUTSCHES HISTORISCHES MUSEUM/A. PSILLE

The calls for the Volkssturm were issued in 1944. Older men and 15-17-year-old boys were equipped with few and outdated weapons.

Ursula von Kardorff also survived the day. Like many others, she was starting to lose her mind, as the bombs made it impossible to sleep: “Why does no one stand on the street and shout ‘Enough! Enough!’? Why is no one going crazy? Why is there no revolution?”

During the US attack, 3,000 Berliners died – including the psychopathic judge Roland Freisler of the Nazis’ People’s Court.

The bodies were gathered in sports halls, where relatives and acquaintances tried to identify the dead. Previously, authorities had placed the bombing victims along the streets, but the “corpse parade” was too gruesome a sight for the citizens.

On Neuenburger Strasse, a girls’ school was hit – hundreds of girls had sought refuge in the cellar, noted Karl Deutmann, who was on duty at the Mannesmann steel company. “The hundred or so corpses of the young victims were laid out in nearby buildings to be identified by their distraught parents, but their injuries were such that only a few of them could be named.”

The regime and the most dedicated Nazis continued to try to keep the spirits of Berliners up. Signs near the ruins forbade looting. Violations would be punished by death, they warned.

“Our walls might break, but not our hearts,” trumpeted graffiti on ruins across the city. The same slogan appeared on posters and banners. “Complete nonsense, the sort of thing that only makes an impression on a blockhead,” Ursula von Kardorff sneered.

The day after the raid, she managed to get to her newspaper offices. “It takes two or three hours just to reach them. We all sit in an enormous room with glass walls, like parrots in the zoo. We are robots, performing functions that everybody knows to be pointless … We have to get out long leaflets every day filled with horror stories about the Russians … and idiotic slogans such as ‘We shall win, because we must win!’”

Iron Cross for 12-year-old heroes

After the Americans’ daytime raids began, Hitler rarely ventured to the surface. A ▶

SHUTTERSTOCK

Film was meant to be Goebbels’s triumph

During the Napoleonic Wars, the fortress town of Kolberg, with just a few thousand German soldiers, defended itself against 22,500 French troops.

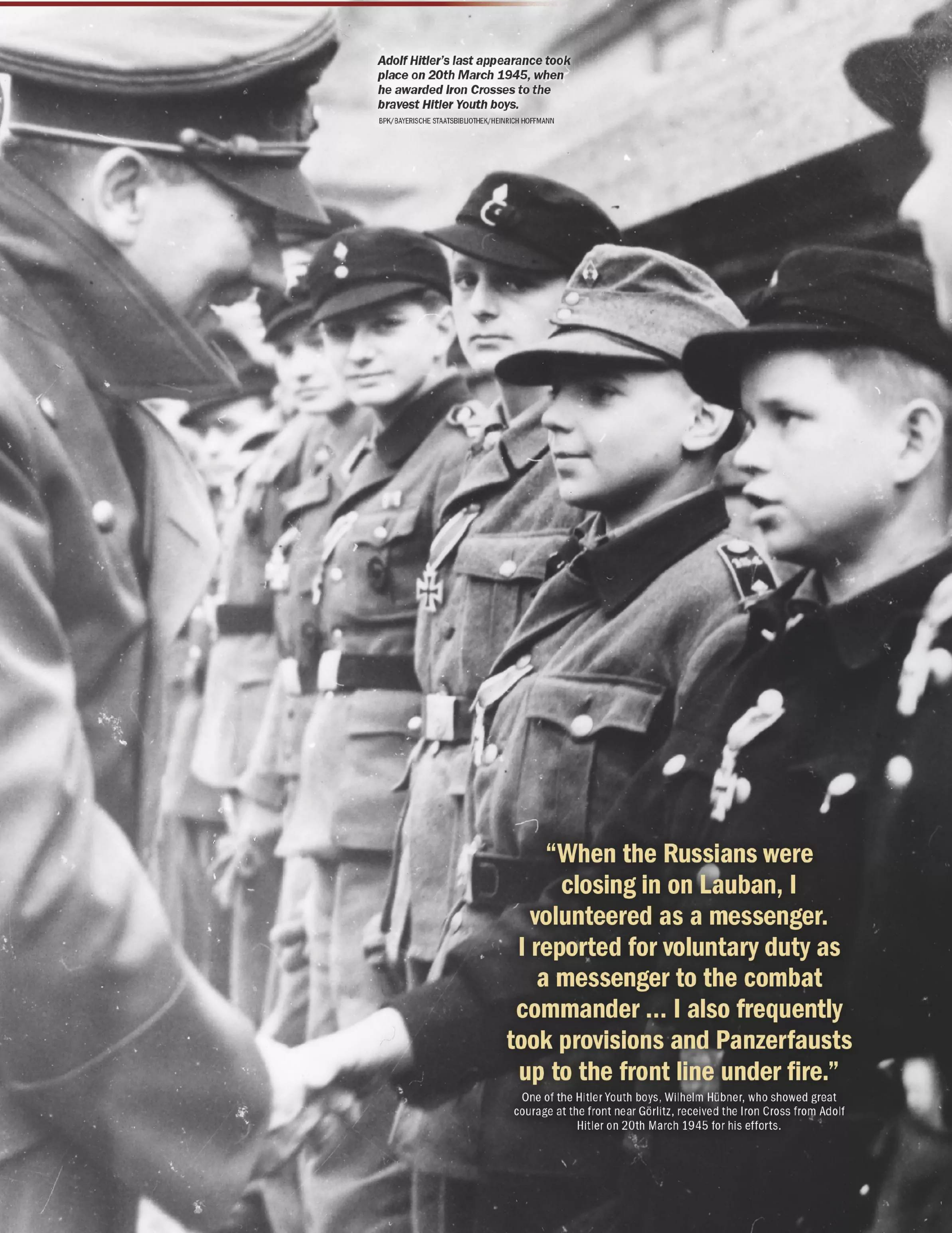
Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels aimed to use this heroic struggle to inspire the German population. Filming for *Kolberg* began in 1943 with a budget of 80 million Reichsmarks, the money going towards thousands of extras and historical costumes.

By 30th January 1945, the film was ready for premiere, but the psychological impact was lost as 280 of Berlin’s 300 cinemas had been destroyed in bombing raids.

187,000 extras were in the film – fewer than 30,000 soldiers participated in the battle in 1807.

7,000 horses were used in the battle scenes.

100 wagonloads of salt were spread to simulate a snow-covered landscape.



Adolf Hitler's last appearance took place on 20th March 1945, when he awarded Iron Crosses to the bravest Hitler Youth boys.

BPK/BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK/HEINRICH HOFFMANN

> **"When the Russians were closing in on Lauban, I volunteered as a messenger. I reported for voluntary duty as a messenger to the combat commander ... I also frequently took provisions and Panzerfausts up to the front line under fire."**

One of the Hitler Youth boys, Wilhelm Hübner, who showed great courage at the front near Görlitz, received the Iron Cross from Adolf Hitler on 20th March 1945 for his efforts.

DOERING'S
EULEN-SEIF
Berlin

On 21st April, the Red Army rolled into the suburbs of Berlin. The end was near.

AKG IMAGES/ RITZAU SCANPIX

handful of Hitler Youth boys were the only ones – apart from the inner circle – who saw him when he awarded them Iron Crosses in the Reich Chancellery garden on 20th March. The event was filmed for the German newsreel, *Wochenschau,* which relayed the most important news before the evening film.

With serious expressions, the battle-hardened children let him stroke their cheeks. Afterwards, they calmly described their efforts at the front. Hitler struggled to grip his left hand – no one could be allowed to see it trembling.

"Maybe we are just a lot of mad mice in a trap," wrote Ursula von Kardorff in her diary. "We rush to and fro, but somebody already holds the trap in his hand, ready to drop it in a butt of water."

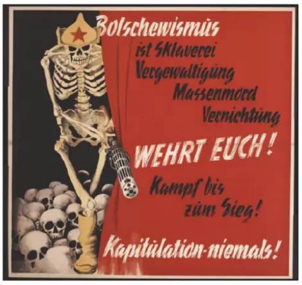
While Hitler and Nazi propaganda urged continued fighting for victory, the Führer prepared to annihilate his own people. The day before the Iron Cross was awarded to the young Hitler Youth, he signed the order that would later be known as the Nero Decree. "The struggle for the very existence of our people forces us to seize any means which can weaken the combat readiness of our enemy and prevent him from advancing," wrote Hitler. Nothing of value should remain for the Allies. Therefore, all bridges, railway tracks, factories, waterworks, power plants and food supplies were to be destroyed.

Armaments Minister Albert Speer realised that the order would make the country almost uninhabitable and began a frantic travel campaign to persuade local Nazi leaders to ignore the order.

Young and old to be sacrificed for Stalin

As early as 1944, all German men aged between 16 and 60 had been called up to a newly formed army called the *Volkssturm* – People's Storm. It comprised the elderly and semi-disabled who still had a civilian job, after the army had already taken everyone who could be used in combat.

In theory, the Volkssturm in Berlin could muster 60,000 men, but only the best units received weapons; the rest were equipped with a jumble of old reserves and captured rifles.



DEUTSCHES HISTORISCHES MUSEUM/A PSILLE

"Resist!" the Nazis warned, "The Soviets bring slavery, rape, mass murder and destruction."

Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, who was also Berlin's Gauleiter (political leader), made the city's Volkssturm soldiers swear an oath to Adolf Hitler. The 'army' then marched through the streets – many of the 'soldiers' armed with spades and wearing their own civilian clothes. Real military training was out of the question, due to the desperate shortage of ammunition.

"My fatherland, secure it: our Führer has a grandfather's army," went a sarcastic song that could be sung to the tune of *Die Wacht am Rhein* – a well-known German soldiers' song.

Recruitment took a week

Seventeen-year-old Helmut Altner was one of the teenagers called up in the spring of 1945. On 29th March, he left his home and embarked on the perilous journey across the city to reach the barracks in Spandau.

"Berlin seems to be falling apart at the seams," he wrote in his diary. "The *U-Bahn* [subway] is running irregularly, and half-hour delays are no exception, while the *S-Bahn* [train], with most of the tracks damaged beyond recognition, is almost completely at a standstill."

On several stretches, he and other travellers had to walk if they failed to hijack a lorry and pressure the driver to take them part of the journey. Along the way, he saw recently bombed houses where 12-year-old boys from the Hitler Youth had been sent to collect body parts from the rubble.

At the barracks, he was issued with an oversized uniform jacket that hung loosely around his thin body. The trousers barely reached his knees. He spent the next few days shooting a rifle and receiving instructions on how to fire the Panzerfaust rocket weapon. Finally, there were some stern words about how deserters and cowards would be shot on the spot – and on 7th April, he was sent to the front.

Day of judgement could begin

The German strategy was to stop the Soviets at the Oder River. For three days in April, the Battle of the Seelow Heights raged, and then the German forces were cleared out of the way and the assault on Berlin could begin. On 19th April, the British bombers made their final raid on Berlin – the Red Army was to be given free rein. The capital's fate was now left to the Volkssturm's elderly men and boys like Helmut Altner. From his underground hideout, Adolf Hitler ordered a fight to the last drop of blood.

Postscript: *Helmut Altner fought in the battles from the suburbs of Berlin all the way into the city centre, where he eventually surrendered. Ursula von Kardorff had fled the city and was staying in Munich when Berlin fell. After the war, she covered the war crimes trials in Nuremberg, among other assignments.*

BRITAIN
GERMANY
Dresden

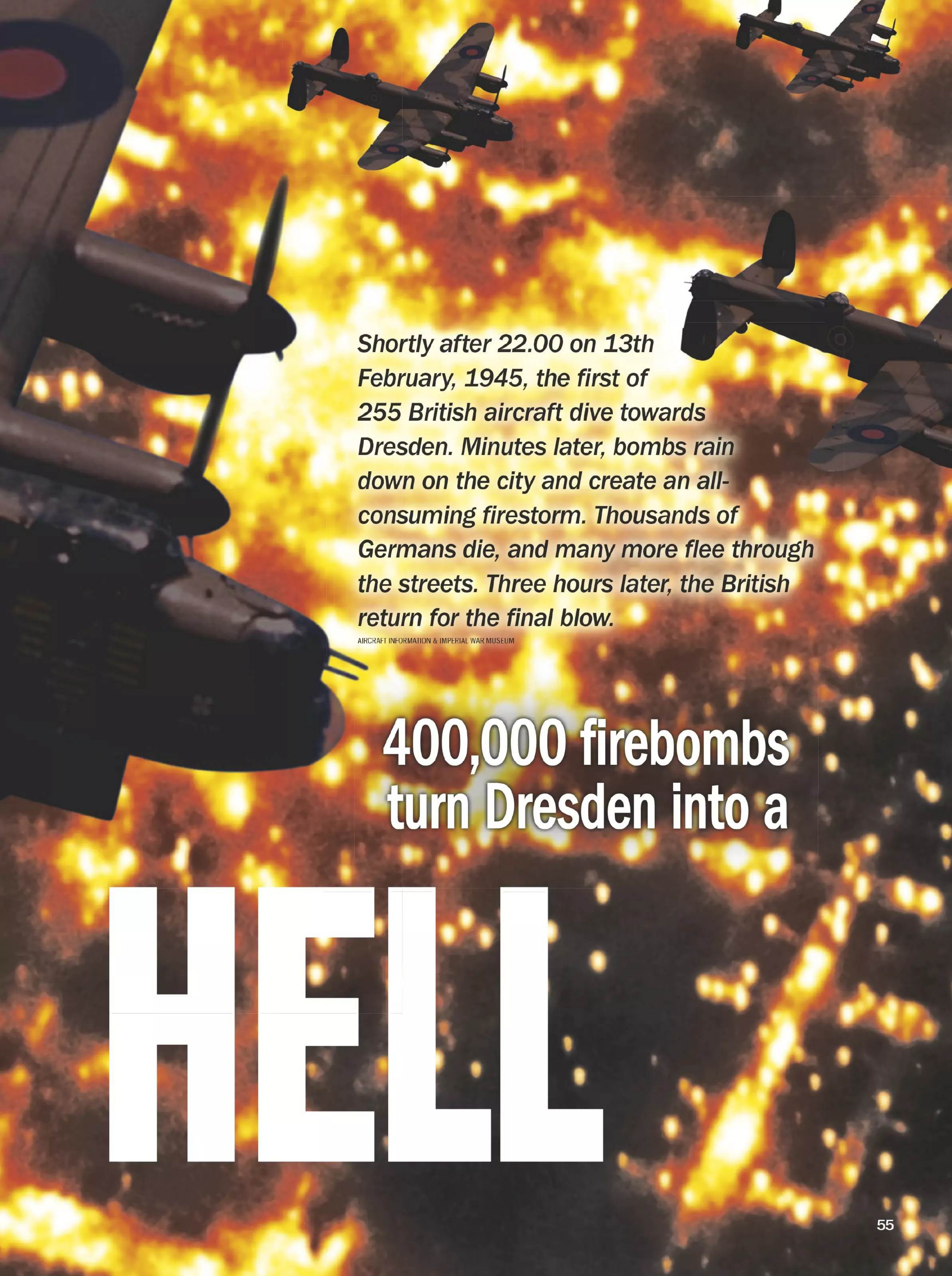
Operation Thunderclap

Germany, 1945

Background The Nazis refuse to accept defeat and still fight fiercely. The Allies consider carpet-bombing different German cities to destroy morale among the population and politicians.

Mission Bomb Dresden and leave the historic city in ruins.

FIERY



Shortly after 22.00 on 13th February, 1945, the first of 255 British aircraft dive towards Dresden. Minutes later, bombs rain down on the city and create an all-consuming firestorm. Thousands of Germans die, and many more flee through the streets. Three hours later, the British return for the final blow.

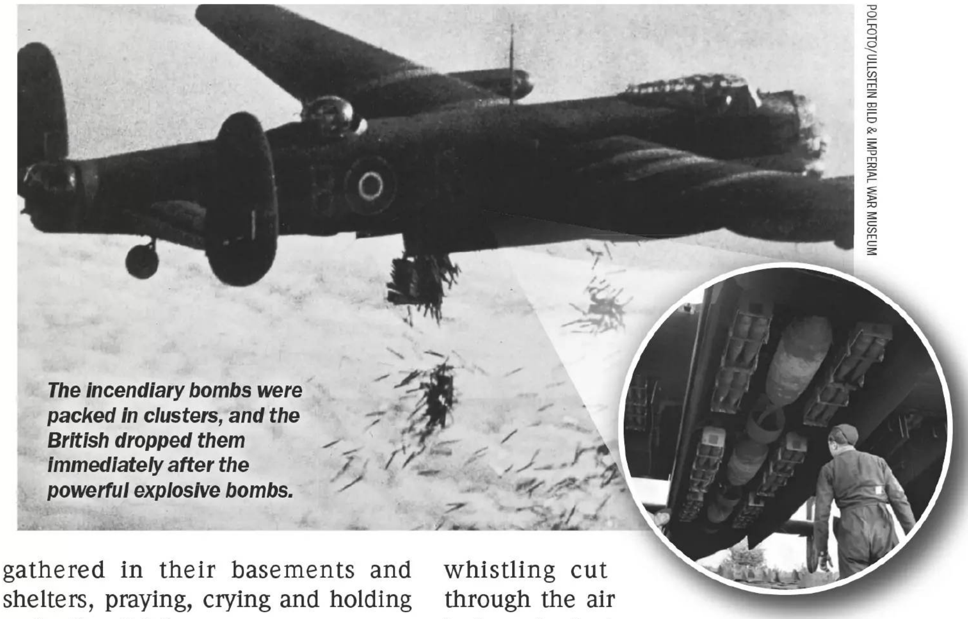
AIRCRAFT INFORMATION & IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

400,000 firebombs turn Dresden into a HELL

BY MORTEN KJERSIDE POULSEN

It was getting late on the evening of 13th February, 1945. The night air was cool, and light clouds drifted across the skies above the city of Dresden in the south of Germany. The city's inhabitants had celebrated Shrove Tuesday on a day that had offered a taste of spring, but as they made their way home from the famous cafés dotted along the river Elbe the idyll was broken.

At 21.51, the air sirens began to wail. They'd sounded often during the past five years of war, but each time it had been a false alarm. Although the city folk never seriously believed that Dresden's beautiful baroque buildings would be targeted, children and adults dashed through the Old Town's cobbled streets to their shelters and cellars.



The incendiary bombs were packed in clusters, and the British dropped them immediately after the powerful explosive bombs.

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD & IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

10 minutes later, the first British squadrons – the Pathfinders – dove towards Dresden to drop target flares ahead of the main assault. At this moment, Dresden's civilians realised that it wasn't only factories and railway installations being attacked, but the city's historical centre too. A shrill voice crackled over the radio, urging people to urgently seek cover.

High above Dresden, British bomber squadrons flew unchallenged over the suburbs. Four hours previously, 255 aircraft had left British airspace, but despite the long journey, they'd encountered virtually no resistance.

The first bomber, *U for Uncle*, opened its hatches at 22.14. "Bombs gone", sounded over the radio as the deadly payload tumbled out of the plane's belly down over Dresden's streets. Thousands of frightened citizens gathered in their basements and shelters, praying, crying and holding each other tightly.

> **"We realised immediately that on this night Dresden's number was up. All hell broke loose. Impact after impact, a whistling, a rushing, everything was shaking, a storm rose, doors and windows were breaking and with every mine or bomb which came down one had the feeling this was the end."**
>
> Herta Daecke sought refuge in the basement under her apartment when the British attacked.

Bomber triggered firestorm

Planes flew over Dresden's centre at a rate of one every seven seconds. Endless whistling cut through the air before deafening explosions rang out between facades. The pressure generated, blew up iron doors, left buildings trembling and saw plaster rattle down walls; then followed the incendiary bombs.

"It felt as if someone directly above me was shaking out coal or potatoes onto the roof", recounted schoolgirl Nora Lang, who hid terrified in the basement of her family's apartment block. "Then sometimes would come this hissing and an explosion."

Thousands of magnesium bombs tumbled through the rooftops and ignited a host of small fires. In the space of eight minutes, the British dropped 881 tonnes of bombs, after which the bombers turned home.

In the streets, the Dresden fire department had no chance of getting the flames under control. The first explosive bombs had shattered buildings into splinters that were now easy to set alight. The many fires merged as temperatures approached 1,000 degrees Celsius. The super-heated air began to rise as a pillar of fire, sucking the oxygen away. 21-year-old engineering student Berthold Meyer experienced the firestorm at close quarters: "My lungs were heaving. My knees began to turn weak. It was horrifying. Some individuals, especially the older people, started to hang back. They would sit down apathetically on the street, or on piles of rubble, and just perish from asphyxiation."

Both trees and people were burned alive as the firestorm enveloped

Air attack came to the rescue

For a few, the bombing of Dresden proved divine intervention. Professor Victor Klemperer and several other Jews were scheduled to be sent to concentration camps on 16th February – three days after the air raid. In the chaos he was able instead to flee with his wife to south-west Germany, where no one knew who they were. Several others followed their example, including Henny Wolf: "For us, however macabre it may sound, the air raid was our salvation and that was exactly how we understood it."

Victor Klemperer tore the yellow star from his clothes and fled during the fire.

ULLSTEIN BILD

everything in its path. The heat was so intense that buildings and people caught fire without being in direct contact with the flames. The more sensible covered themselves in wet blankets and immediately fled towards the Elbe. Others paused to save personal belongings because they thought the bombing was over. But they were terribly mistaken.

Transport hub led to bombing

World War II felt remote to most of Dresden's inhabitants. A few bombs had been dropped in the surrounding rural areas every now and then, but nothing that caused serious damage or hurt anyone. The war's two fronts were far away, and until now British bombers had not targeted Dresden.

But this picture changed as the war progressed, and Dresden's fate became entwined with the appointment of Arthur 'Bomber' Harris as head of the RAF's Bomber Command in February 1942.

One of Harris's first tasks was to implement a new strategy called 'area bombing'. So far, the British had attempted precision bombing, but nine times out of ten the bombs missed their targets. It was obvious British aircraft couldn't bomb accurately enough, so the argument went that it was "better to bomb everything than nothing". Harris ordered numerous carpet bombings of specified areas – usually urban centres – using incendiary bombs.

In addition, Harris instructed his bombers to attack in two separate waves, half an hour apart. Experience showed that it increased the chance of creating a devastating firestorm. This had proved true for Hamburg's inhabitants when a twin British attack on 27th July, 1943 sparked a fierce inferno that killed over 40,000 people. After this personal success, Harris made the double firebomb attack an ongoing strategy.

By summer 1944, the Germans were in retreat on all fronts. Allied high command discussed the possibility of forcing Hitler to surrender by launching a giant bombing raid on Berlin, but on 16th December, 1944, the Germans launched a counter-offensive in the Ardennes. 400,000 soldiers accompanied by 1,200 tanks punched a hole through the Allied lines in Belgium.

The Allies were left shaken, and the idea to target only Berlin was dropped. Instead, improved Lancaster aircraft would bomb the morale out of Berlin and other German cities. Chief of the Air Staff Sir Charles Portal imagined that "massive destruction can be created if the whole attack is concentrated on a single large city that is not Berlin. The effect will be particularly high if the city has not yet hit."

This made Dresden a prime target. It was the seventh largest city in Germany and was largely unscathed. Crucially, however, it was a transport hub in the defence of the Eastern Front.

Every day, troops travelled through Dresden on their way to the battlefields, while thousands of refugees streamed in from the opposite direction. The Red Army was now only 113 kilometres (70 miles) from the city, and the Allies ▶

Dresden was Elbe's pearl

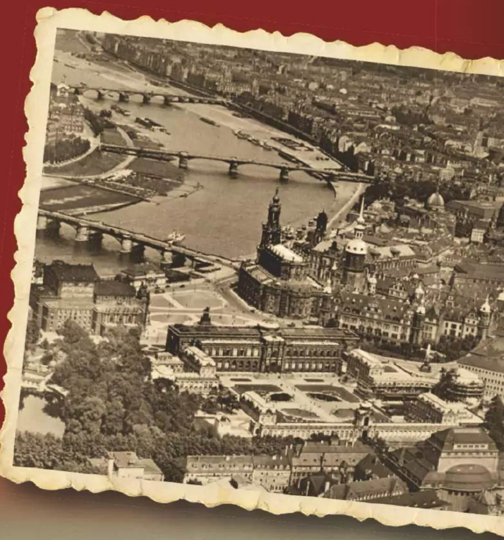
Dresden's architecture was inspired by the Italian renaissance and the city was renowned far and wide for its beauty.

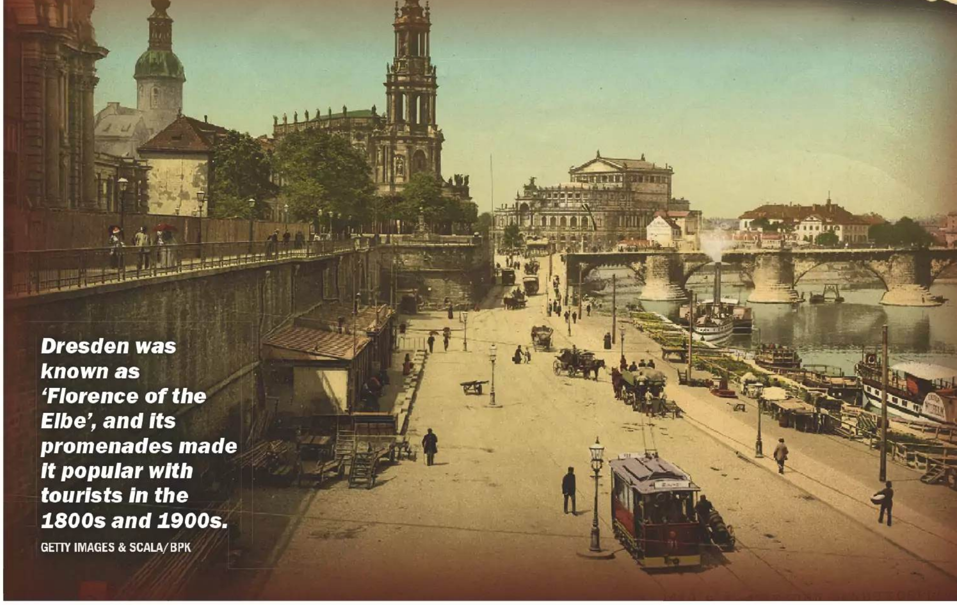
Towards the end of World War II, Dresden remained one of a handful of German cities that had not yet been bombed to rubble.

The city had been an architectural gem since 1697, when the Elector of Saxony, Frederick Augustus, was crowned King Augustus II of Poland. The monarch was inspired by Renaissance Italy and needed an impressive capital for his empire. He chose Dresden, which was good news for the city's artists and craftsmen. Soon sandstone palaces and churches shot up, and in 1734 the beautiful Protestant Frauenkirche was completed.

Its tall dome ensured the church dominated Dresden's skyline for the next 200 years, symbolising the city's prosperity.

August's successor, August III, continued to embellish the city, and created magnificent promenades along the Elbe. Dresden was nicknamed *Elbflorenz* – 'Florence of the Elbe' – and became a favourite holiday destination in the 1800s and 1900s that attracted tourists from all over Europe. Their number included Britons, and the people of Dresden could not have imagined their city would fall victim to a British bombing raid.



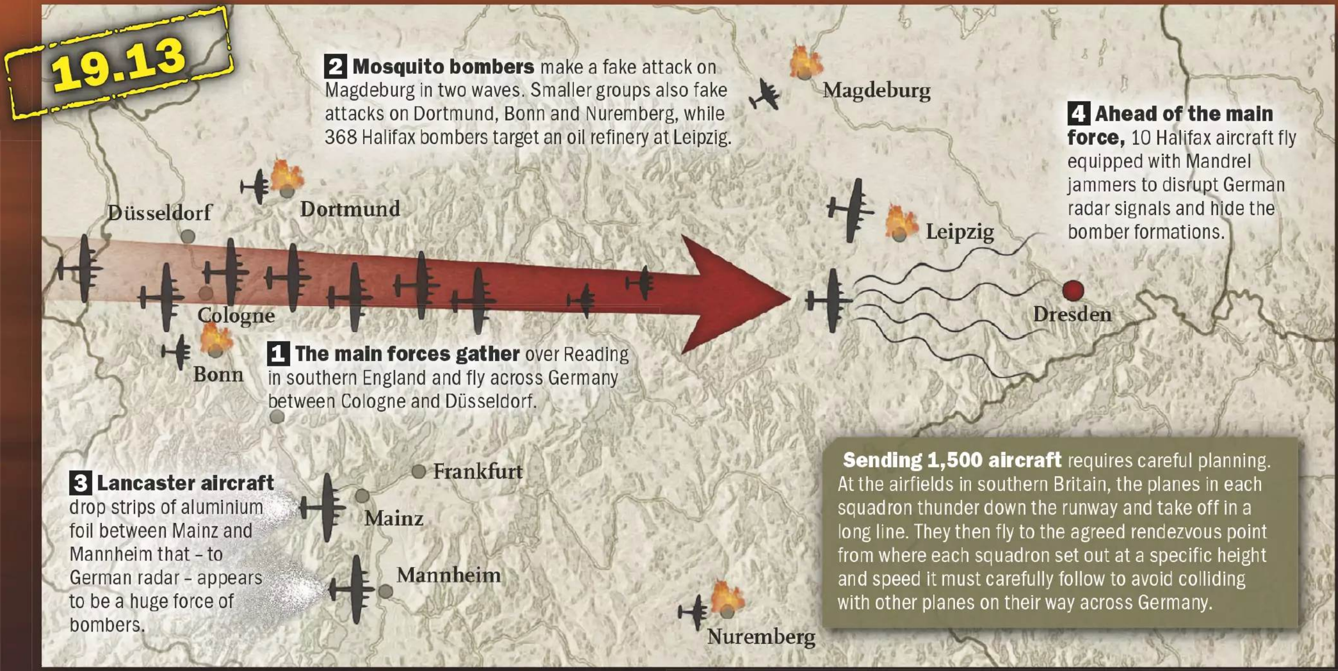


Dresden was known as 'Florence of the Elbe', and its promenades made it popular with tourists in the 1800s and 1900s.

GETTY IMAGES & SCALA/BPK

Smart tactics duped German air defences

The attack on Dresden involved almost 1,500 aircraft. Half bombed the city itself, while the rest provided diversions in the forms of small-scale bombing and electronic warfare. It meant even the sharpest German radar operators couldn't predict where the main strike would occur.



19.13

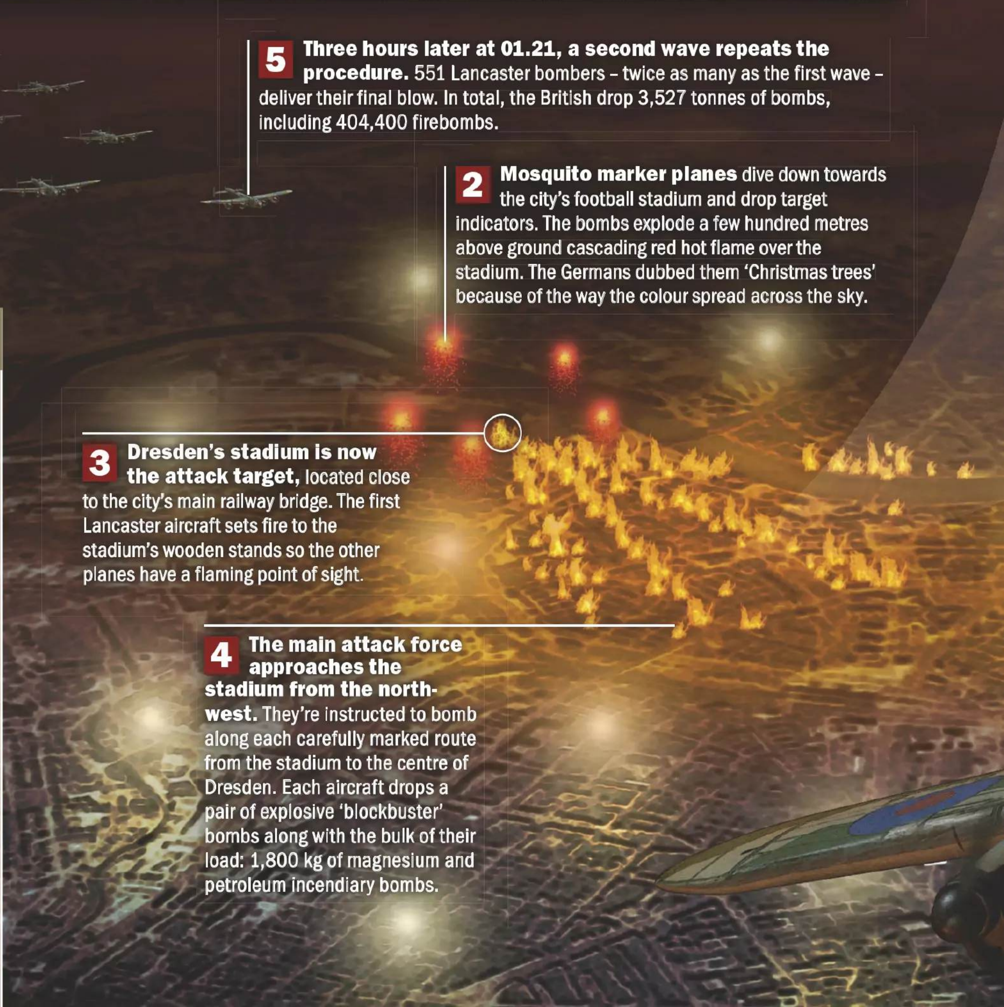
1 The main forces gather over Reading in southern England and fly across Germany between Cologne and Düsseldorf.

2 Mosquito bombers make a fake attack on Magdeburg in two waves. Smaller groups also fake attacks on Dortmund, Bonn and Nuremberg, while 368 Halifax bombers target an oil refinery at Leipzig.

3 Lancaster aircraft drop strips of aluminium foil between Mainz and Mannheim that – to German radar – appears to be a huge force of bombers.

4 Ahead of the main force, 10 Halifax aircraft fly equipped with Mandrel jammers to disrupt German radar signals and hide the bomber formations.

Sending 1,500 aircraft requires careful planning. At the airfields in southern Britain, the planes in each squadron thunder down the runway and take off in a long line. They then fly to the agreed rendezvous point from where each squadron set out at a specific height and speed it must carefully follow to avoid colliding with other planes on their way across Germany.



22.03

5 Three hours later at 01.21, a second wave repeats the procedure. 551 Lancaster bombers – twice as many as the first wave – deliver their final blow. In total, the British drop 3,527 tonnes of bombs, including 404,400 firebombs.

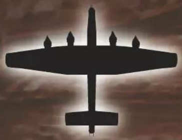
2 Mosquito marker planes dive down towards the city's football stadium and drop target indicators. The bombs explode a few hundred metres above ground cascading red hot flame over the stadium. The Germans dubbed them 'Christmas trees' because of the way the colour spread across the sky.

3 Dresden's stadium is now the attack target, located close to the city's main railway bridge. The first Lancaster aircraft sets fire to the stadium's wooden stands so the other planes have a flaming point of sight.

4 The main attack force approaches the stadium from the north-west. They're instructed to bomb along each carefully marked route from the stadium to the centre of Dresden. Each aircraft drops a pair of explosive 'blockbuster' bombs along with the bulk of their load: 1,800 kg of magnesium and petroleum incendiary bombs.

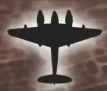
Planes over Dresden

Handley Page Halifax



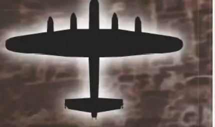
Length: 21.81 m
Wingspan: 31.74 m
Top speed: 498 km/h
Bomb load: 5,448 kg
Range: 2,032 km

De Havilland Mosquito

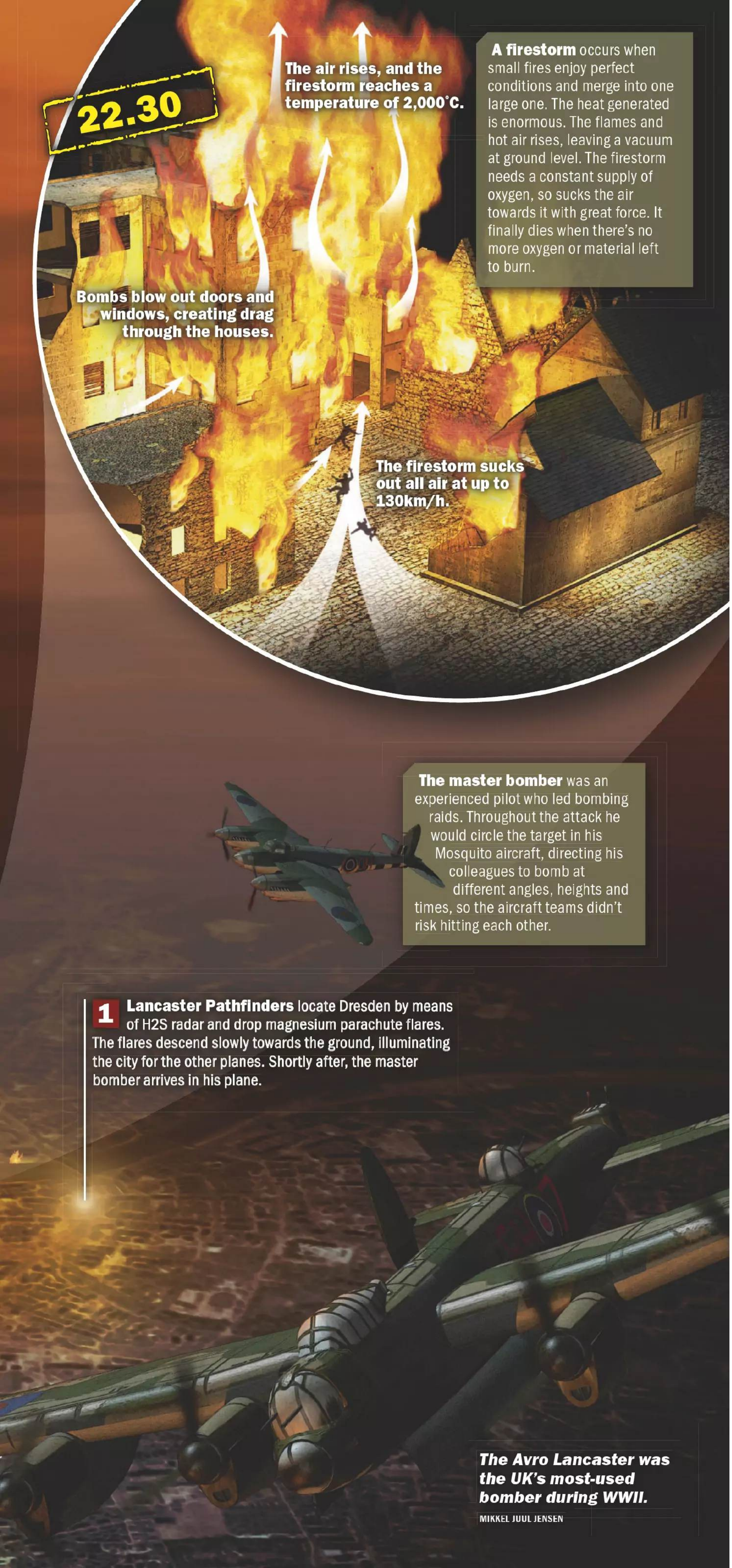


Length: 12.64 m
Wingspan: 16.5 m
Top speed: 669 km/h
Bomb load: 1,816 kg
Range: 2,395 km

Avro Lancaster



Length: 21.08 m
Wingspan: 31 m
Top speed: 462 km/h
Bomb load: 9,998 kg
Range: 4,072 km



The air rises, and the firestorm reaches a temperature of 2,000°C.

A firestorm occurs when small fires enjoy perfect conditions and merge into one large one. The heat generated is enormous. The flames and hot air rises, leaving a vacuum at ground level. The firestorm needs a constant supply of oxygen, so sucks the air towards it with great force. It finally dies when there's no more oxygen or material left to burn.

Bombs blow out doors and windows, creating drag through the houses.

The firestorm sucks out all air at up to 130km/h.

The master bomber was an experienced pilot who led bombing raids. Throughout the attack he would circle the target in his Mosquito aircraft, directing his colleagues to bomb at different angles, heights and times, so the aircraft teams didn't risk hitting each other.

1 **Lancaster Pathfinders** locate Dresden by means of H2S radar and drop magnesium parachute flares. The flares descend slowly towards the ground, illuminating the city for the other planes. Shortly after, the master bomber arrives in his plane.

The Avro Lancaster was the UK's most-used bomber during WWII.

MIKKEL JUUL JENSEN

wanted to aid their advance. Intelligence suggested that the Germans could mobilise around 500,000 troops by 15th February. Many would travel through Dresden, so a massive attack on the city's rail network would delay their deployment considerably.

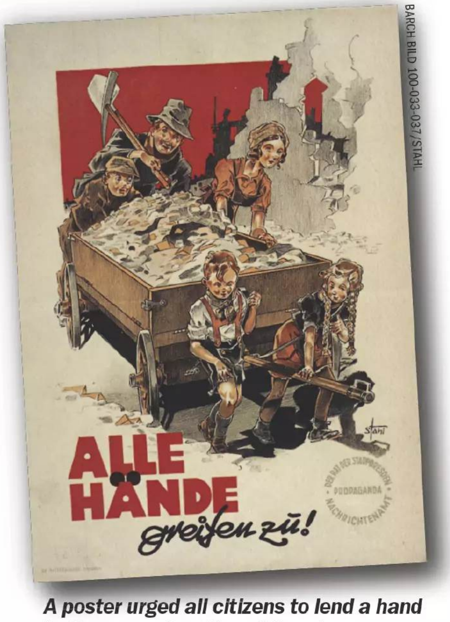
Bomber Command wasn't satisfied with simply bombing railway installations around Dresden, however. If they bombed the city centre they could destroy communication hubs and – most importantly – create chaos among civilians. The Germans' willingness to continue fighting would be broken, thus paving the road to victory. The Allies hoped to paralyse the entire region, and Harris wrote in a letter to Winston Churchill that he would "bomb Germany conclusively flat".

The Prime Minister approved the operation in late January 1945. Berlin, Dresden and Chemnitz were to be attacked as soon as possible, and on 13th February, weather conditions were finally suitable for a raid on Dresden. The city would be subject to Harris' double attack – two separate bombings in the space of three hours.

> **"Although we were 40 miles from Dresden, fires were reddening the sky ahead... The streets of the city were a fantastic latticework of fire. It was as though one was looking down at the fiery outlines of a crossword puzzle; blazing streets stretched from east to west, from north to south, in a gigantic saturation of flame. I was completely awed by the spectacle."**
>
> Miles Tripp, British bombardier, who took part in the evening's second attack on Dresden.

Second wave completes firestorm

The inferno rose like a chimney over Dresden. The column of hot air was visible 160 kilometres away as the second wave of bombers swarmed into the city at 01.07. Clouds of smoke rising kilometres into the air disrupted their vision, while the firestorm's fierce heat could be felt in the cockpit over three kilometres up. On the ground, it suddenly became apparent more bombs were on their way:



BARCH BILD 100-033-037/STAHL

A poster urged all citizens to lend a hand in the reconstruction of Dresden.

"Suddenly we heard the distant hooting of sirens from the south-eastern suburbs: air alert!" Christian Just recalled. "I still remember how some people cried out, 'No! Not again.' And then a scenario began which engraved the inferno of Dresden on my mind: engine noise, the rush of the bombs, the deafening roar of the bombs, a moment of silence and then the same again, and again and again!"

It was like a slaughterhouse. The electricity was out, so the sirens hadn't worked in the centre, meaning the second wave arrived without warning. Many died attempting to escape through the streets, others while they were saving their belongings. Another inhabitant, Gerhard Erich Bähr, had just reached his cellar when the bombs fell again:

"The walls tottered, square stones crashed down on us, the air was full of dust, we couldn't breathe… My legs were buried. On them lay a square of sandstone, a suitcase and a thick grey sack which felt wet… I tried to pull away to get out. I recognised this wasn't a sack, but a man without a head."

The second wave's additional 1,175 tonnes of incendiary bombs further intensified the firestorm. Burning wooden beams flew through the air as sparks and flames rained down everywhere. They constantly threatened to blind or mutilate the fugitives struggling to escape from the old town's maze of streets. One such person was 18-year-old Gertraud Freundel:

"Outside the firestorm howled. It was blowing furiously, and the draft was pulling us into the city… Father held me tight by the arm… We had to cross this infernal tempest that was raging down Reichstraße with storm and fire. I was terrified and held back, but father pulled me and implored, shouting through the wind's roar: 'We must get through this!'"

The heat was so violent that the asphalt roads and pavements melted. Some lost their shoes in a thick porridge of tar, carrying on until their feet were too badly burned. Survival depended on a person's footwear, because those with tight-fitting, sturdy boots had the best chance of escaping the inferno before being devoured by the fierce flames.

Lack of air defences proved costly

When the Allies chose to bomb Dresden, they never imagined the attack would be one of history's most violent. Several factors contributed to the scale of destruction. First and foremost was that the city's air defences were virtually non-existent. Dresden's anti-aircraft guns had been packed up and shipped to the industrial Ruhr district a few weeks earlier.

Compounding this was a shortage of fuel, which meant Germans had to keep their fighters on the ground for as long as possible until they were completely sure where the British were bombing. Oil supplies were so tight that Luftwaffe planes were towed on to the runways by horses and oxen. British bombers were therefore able to fly undisturbed over Dresden while their deadly payload tumbled inexorably towards the ground.

In addition, the city's bunkers and shelters were inadequate and poorly constructed. Most had no fireproof walls or doors, nor did they have filters to allow oxygen to circulate while keeping toxic gases out. These shortcomings meant the firestorm was able to suck all the oxygen out of the shelters and basements leaving only deadly carbon monoxide in its place.

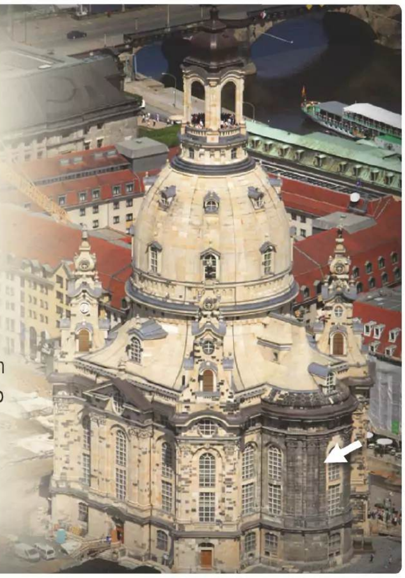
Third, it was mainly women, children and the elderly who lived in Dresden. They were less likely to leave the basements to put out the fires in their apartments, and so the firestorm was able to reach its devastating maximum.

Finally, the British had become experts in destruction. By the end of the war they had huge volumes of aircraft and bombs available. In addition, they'd started firestorms in several German cities prior to Dresden and had developed the cold-blooded double attack to perfection.

Church took 60 years to rebuild

After the bombings, the Frauenkirche's dome still towered over the city. But the intense heat had weakened the foundations, and after two days the church collapsed. Rebuilding was not a priority in East Germany, and it was only after reunification that work began.

Over the course of 11 years the church was restored stone by stone according to its original drawings until it was finally completed on 30th October, 2005.



POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD

The Frauenkiche was, as far as possible, restored with its original, dark sandstone.

> **"The sight that greeted my eyes was appalling… Everywhere charred corpses. I quickly headed home, hoping to find my loved ones alive, but unfortunately this was not so. They lay on the street in front of No 38, as peacefully as if they were asleep. What I went through at that point you can easily imagine."**
>
> Hans Schröter found his wife and son dead in Mariestraße in the centre the following day.

Prisoners cleared basements

The following day a dirty, grey smoke hung over Dresden. It was so thick many didn't realise it was morning. Fires continued to rage everywhere as survivors and rescue teams picked their way among the ruins. In many places it was still too hot to move, and survivors were met with a grotesque and horrific sight as they searched for loved ones. Margaret Freyer looked desperately for her fiancé among the dead:

"From some of the debris poked arms, heads, legs, shattered skulls. The static water tanks were filled up to the top with dead human beings… Most people looked as if they had been inflated, with large yellow and brown stains on their bodies: people whose clothes were still glowing."

And still the bombers came. At 12.17, 316 American B17 bombers buzzed over the burning ruins. They'd been redirected to Dresden because cloud cover was too low over their primary target. Another 782 tonnes of bombs rained down on the city.

Dresden remained loyal to the end

The largest fires weren't extinguished until the following day, and over the following weeks 2,000 Wehrmacht troops and 1,000 prisoners of war cleared the blocked streets and emptied the shelters and cellars of bodies poisoned by carbon monoxide. It was gruesome work. An area of Dresden around 21 km^2 had been left in ruins. 12,000 buildings and 200 factories were destroyed, and around 25,000 people died, with twice as many left homeless. On 21st February, Dresden's old square was closed and transformed into a giant crematorium where the bodies were burned.

Despite the destruction and huge loss of life, the raid failed to prevent troops being transported to the Eastern Front or break German morale. Two weeks after the attack, the number of trains travelling through Dresden was back to normal levels, and the city's surviving residents remained loyal to Hitler to the bitter end.

Dresden remained the only German city to fly swastikas eight days after Hitler's death before it finally fell to the Russians on 8th May.

Harris was object of hate

After Dresden was left in a smoking heap, the British – and particularly bomber chief Arthur Harris – met with strong criticism for their strategy.

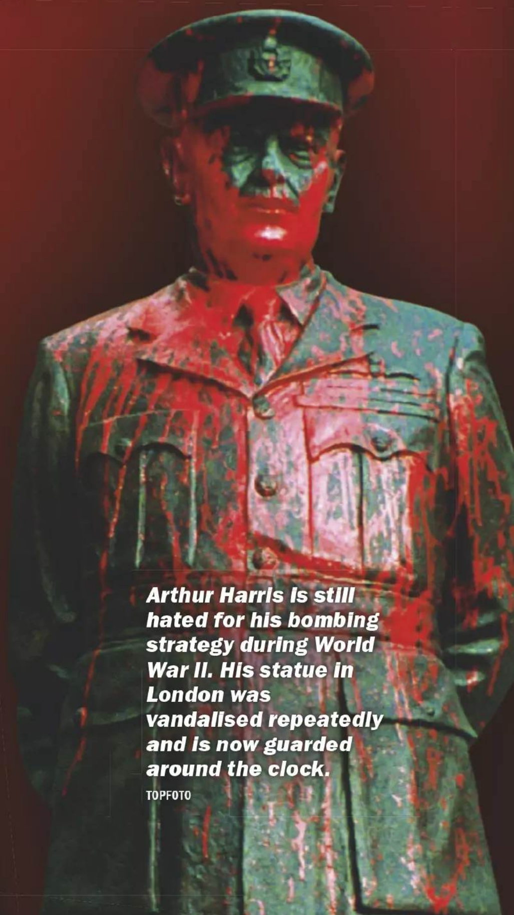
After the attack on Dresden, the Nazi propaganda machine went into overdrive. The Germans consistently added an extra zero on all the numbers that came out of the city to garner sympathy. Swiss and Swedish newspapers subsequently wrote that up to 200,000 were killed in Dresden. Pictures of burned children made the British – and especially RAF Bomber Command chief Arthur Harris – look like unscrupulous killers.

By the start of 1945, the Americans were particularly keen to have bombers focus on attacking specific oil refineries rather than carpet-bomb German cities. Harris was furious and threatened to resign as head of Bomber Command, as he believed attacks on the civilian population were the only way to break the Germans. Management caved in, and Harris was allowed to choose the targets he wanted, which according to critics, all too often meant the bombers carried out cold-blooded double attacks on German cities.

After the bombing of Dresden, the political climate changed in Britain. Winston Churchill was worried about how the outside world perceived British actions.

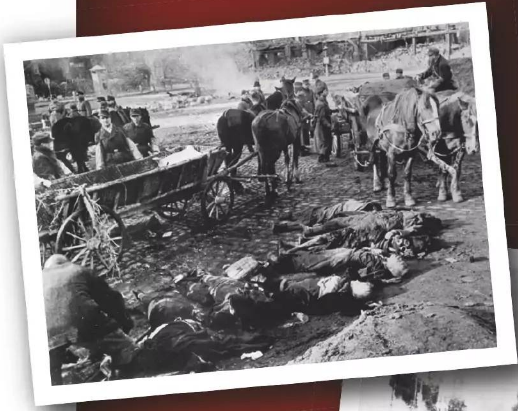
"It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing German cities simply the sake of increasing the terror… should be reviewed. Otherwise we shall come into control of an utterly ruined land", he explained to Harris. Nevertheless, there was never a demand from the British population to stop the bombing - especially not when German V-1 and V-2 rockets rained down every night.

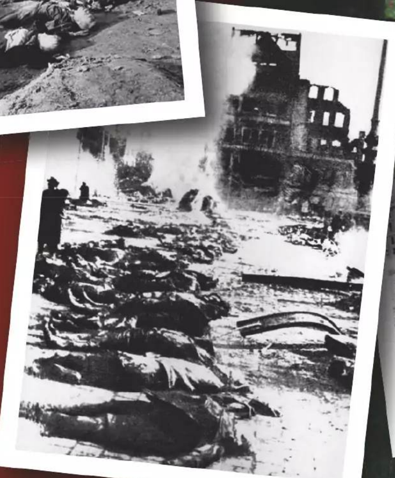
After the war, the criticisms continued to come for 'Bomber Harris', who was even branded a war criminal. Eventually it became too much, and after publishing his memoirs, Harris moved to South Africa.



Arthur Harris is still hated for his bombing strategy during World War II. His statue in London was vandalised repeatedly and is now guarded around the clock.

TOPFOTO



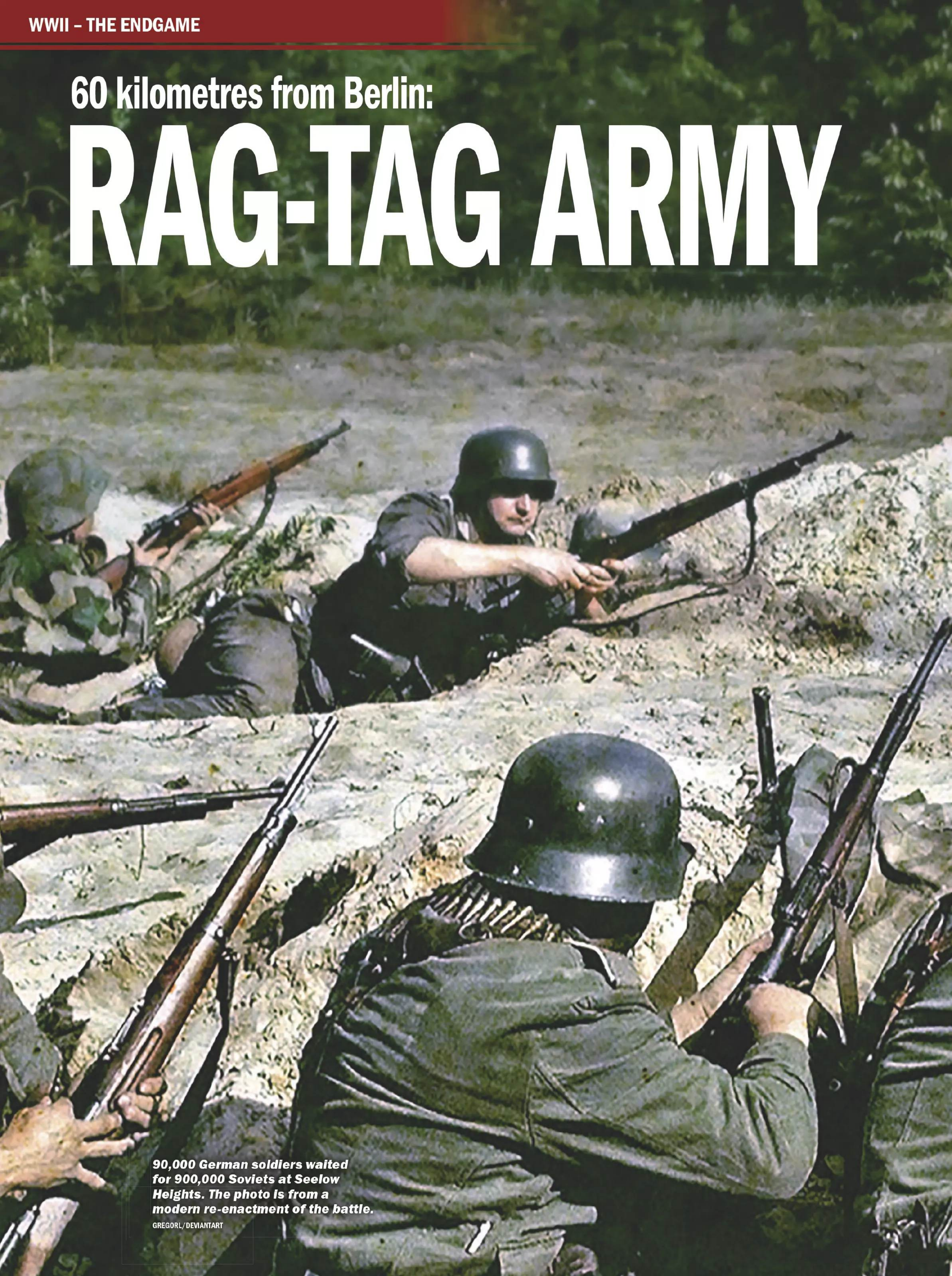


The victims of the raid on Dresden in February, 1945 were placed in large piles in the city square where 6,865 bodies were burned.

POLFOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD/CORBIS

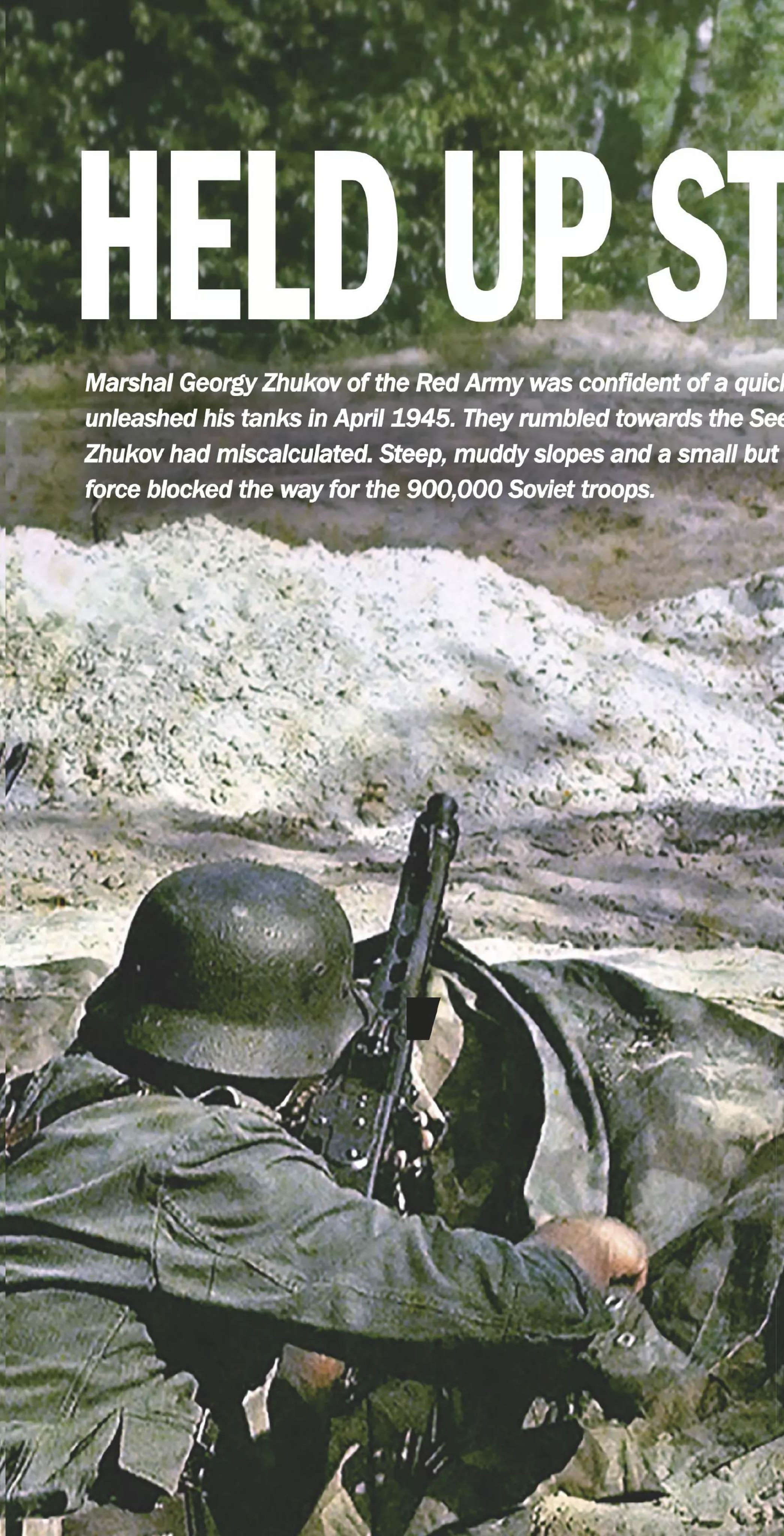
60 kilometres from Berlin:

RAG-TAG ARMY



90,000 German soldiers waited for 900,000 Soviets at Seelow Heights. The photo is from a modern re-enactment of the battle.

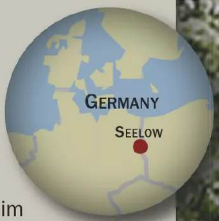
GREGORL/DEVIANTART



HELD UP STALIN

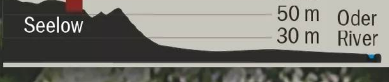
Marshal Georgy Zhukov of the Red Army was confident of a quick victory when he unleashed his tanks in April 1945. They rumbled towards the Seelow Heights, but Zhukov had miscalculated. Steep, muddy slopes and a small but determined German force blocked the way for the 900,000 Soviet troops.

GERMANY/1945



The Reichsstraße 1 road leads from Königsberg to Berlin. Soviet Marshal Zhukov is using it to advance on the German capital. But before him rise the steep slopes of the Seelow Heights and a formidable line of German defenders.

Seelow Heights, with their high slopes, formed the Germans' main line of defence.



BY ELSE CHRISTENSEN

Private Martin Kleint took a deep drag on his cigarette. It was nearly 03.00 and the 18-year-old soldier hadn't slept a wink. The private in the Panzer Division Kurmark was manning a trench with his comrades on the Seelow Heights, around 60 kilometres east of Berlin.

All night the men had listened to the thunder of guns from the Red Army positions to the east. Night-time bombardments were nothing new. The soldiers were used to listening to the Soviet "*Morgenkonzert*" (morning concert), as they dubbed the regular attacks aimed at disturbing their rest.

The explosions were rapidly getting nearer. Kleint felt a knot in his stomach – this could be it. He barely had time to acknowledge the thought before a deep rumble shook the ground. Sand and pebbles rattled down the side of the trench as the Soviet Katyusha batteries kicked in with their persistent howl. The sky was lit up by the glow of flares and phosphorous raining down from Soviet aircraft over the German positions. The glare lit up the white phosphorous clouds, which danced like ghosts in the air. Kleint stubbed out his cigarette and grabbed his helmet.

IMAGESELECT

Soviet forces began the Battle of Seelow Heights by bombarding the German defensive positions with thousands of artillery shells and Katyusha rockets.

"Now we're in for it," said the soldier next to him in a hoarse voice. A moment later, a shell struck close by, and earth cascaded into the trench.

It was 03.00 on 16th April 1945, and the Red Army's Marshal Georgy Zhukov and his 1st Belarusian Front had launched a massive attack on the German positions on Seelow Heights just west of the Polish-German border. The Germans were in full retreat and the war was almost won. This hill near the town of Seelow was the last remaining obstacle for the Soviet forces. Behind it the Reichsstraße 1 road continued directly on to Berlin and final victory over the Third Reich.

Hitler's last stand

> **"[They will] bleed to death before the capital of the German Reich."**
>
> Adolf Hitler in his Führer Order of the Day for 14th April 1945.

Soviets believed victory would be swift

Red Army troops had been driving the Germans out of occupied Poland, metre by metre, since 12th January 1945. In the space of two short weeks, the Soviet army advanced 438 km from the Vistula River, which flowed through the heart of modern-day Poland, to the Oder River, just 69 km from Berlin.

Zhukov knew the German army was crumbling. It was short of men, ammunition and fuel. When, on 22nd January, he began to send his forces across the Oder River at the town of Küstrin, which the Red Army had just captured, the marshal was convinced victory wasn't far off.

Unfortunately, after the Soviets had established a bridgehead on the western bank, the advance was temporarily halted when they encountered pockets of German resistance. It wasn't until early April that Zhukov was finally ready to resume his campaign – it was time for the Soviets' last major push. Stalin had decreed that the Red Army would take the German capital on 22nd April – the birthday of the late revolutionary hero Vladimir Lenin.

Germans lacked everything

Zhukov's plan was to break through at the Seelow Heights, a large ridge around

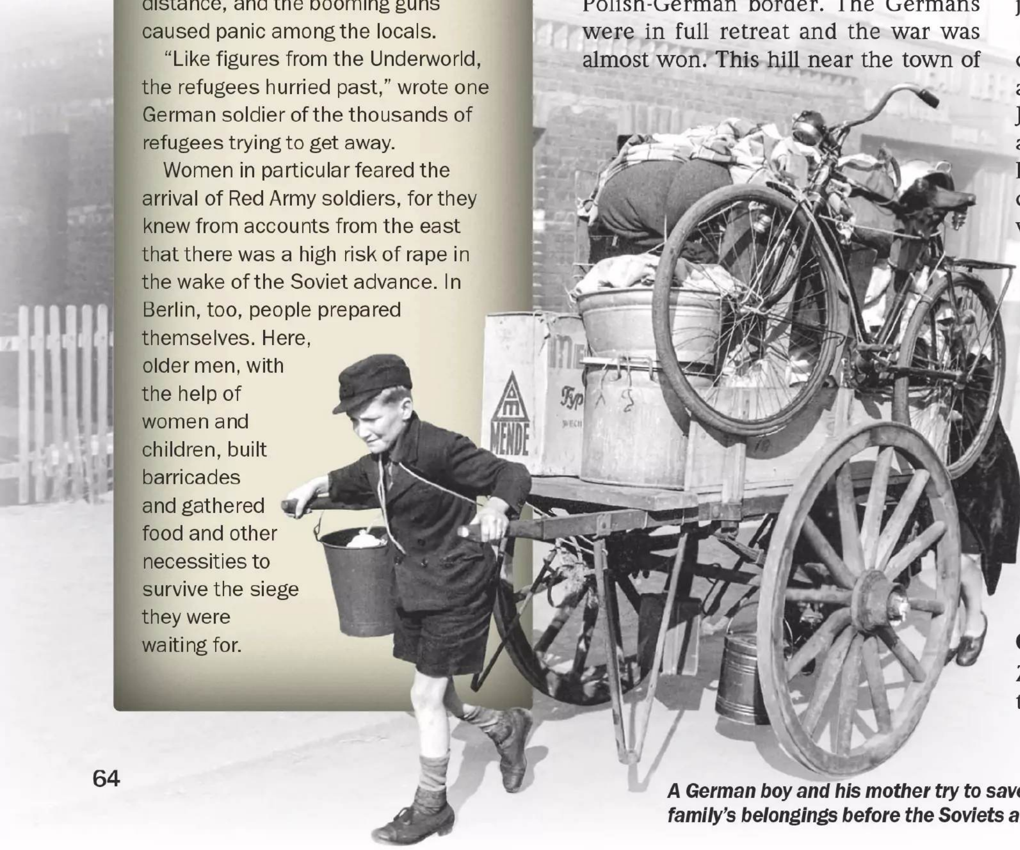
BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Civilians fled from the Red Army

"Ivan is coming!" came the desperate shouts of warning from one German civilian to another. The fierce fighting around Seelow could be heard in the distance, and the booming guns caused panic among the locals.

"Like figures from the Underworld, the refugees hurried past," wrote one German soldier of the thousands of refugees trying to get away.

Women in particular feared the arrival of Red Army soldiers, for they knew from accounts from the east that there was a high risk of rape in the wake of the Soviet advance. In Berlin, too, people prepared themselves. Here, older men, with the help of women and children, built barricades and gathered food and other necessities to survive the siege they were waiting for.



A German boy and his mother try to save the family's belongings before the Soviets arrive.

10 km west of the Oder and about 60 km east of Berlin. If the Russian's plan succeeded, the tanks would roll through the German positions on the ridge and straight on to the capital.

The Wehrmacht's 9th Army had fortified the ridge with 90,000 men and 512 tanks. The ridge itself constituted an effective fortification, with its extremely steep slopes reaching up to 60 metres in height. The heights formed part of the defensive line that the Germans called the Hardenberg-Stellung. The line ran along the edge of the Seelow Heights and the Alte Oder, a tributary of the main Oder River. It comprised two to three rows of trenches guarded by heavily armed positions, numerous observation posts, and anti-tank obstacles, such as deep trenches. The high ground was also fortified with artillery positions. From nearby airbases, around 300 fighter planes stood ready on the runways.

Hitler goaded the Soviets in his usual bombastic style: "For the last time our deadly enemies, the Jewish Bolsheviks, have rallied their massive forces for an attack," the dictator wrote in his Führer-Order-of-the-Day for 14th April 1945.

"They intend to destroy Germany and to exterminate our people... We have been expecting this attack, and since January this year have done everything possible to build up a strong front. The enemy will be received with massive artillery fire.

"Gaps in our infantry have been filled by countless [new] emergency units, newly raised units and Volkssturm. This time the Bolsheviks [will] bleed to death before the capital of the German Reich."

As always, Hitler's words bore little resemblance to reality. The German army was short of everything, and the Volkssturm were little more than a hastily raised militia comprising old men and young boys, prompting General Gotthard Heinrici, who had overall responsibility for the 9th Army as commander of Army Group Vistula, to ask Hitler for more tank forces ahead of the battle. The dictator refused, having sent a large number of tanks to Hungary in March to defend the few oil fields still in German hands.

Heinrici was luckier when he requested more soldiers on 6th April. SS commander Himmler, Grand Admiral Dönitz and Reichsmarschall Göring sent the last of their reserves to the Seelow Heights. These were primarily Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel whose ships and planes had either been destroyed or left immobilised due to a chronic lack of fuel.

Heinrici also drafted in men from the police, customs service and RAD, the Reich Labour Service, the latter of which was mainly engaged in construction but also supplied men for the anti-aircraft guns. Few had any experience serving in the infantry, and many were so young that war service was completely alien to them. Ammunition supplies were also becoming acute – the troops had only enough shells for a few days' fighting, for example.

The plain Hero of the Soviet Union medal was the highest that could be awarded.

IMAGESELECT & SHUTTERSTOCK

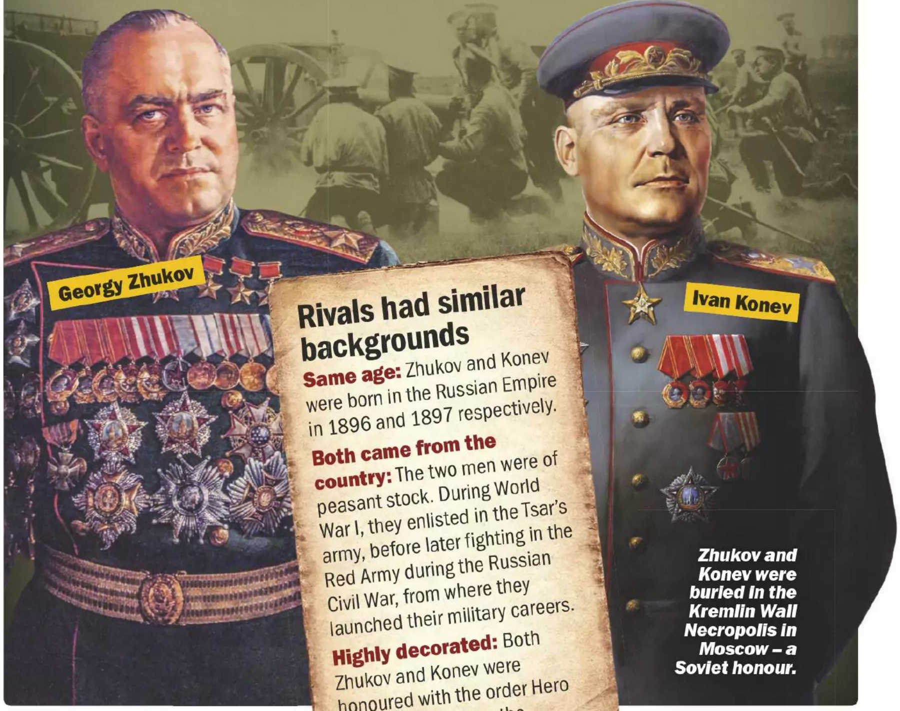
Stalin forced his marshals to a race

Two Soviet marshals fought to reach Berlin first, fearing the wrath of Stalin. It would cost the Red Army dearly at Seelow Heights.

Georgy Zhukov's efforts to quickly take Berlin were not purely down to professional pride. Zhukov also wanted to outdo his arch-rival, Marshal Ivan Konev. Konev was advancing on Berlin from the south with his 1st Ukrainian Front, while Zhukov approached from the north with his troops, which made up the 1st Belarusian Front.

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin was notoriously merciless to officers who let him down in the field – and now both men feared they would pay with their careers or their lives if they didn't get to the German capital first. Throughout the offensive, Stalin deliberately played the two senior officers off against each other to hasten the capture of Berlin.

Today, historians believe that the race pushed the two military leaders to carry out pre-emptive raids like the one Zhukov launched at Seelow Heights, with unnecessarily high casualties. Stalin eventually let Zhukov take Berlin, while Konev was sent south-west to meet the Americans.



Zhukov and Konev were buried in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis in Moscow – a Soviet honour.

Rivals had similar backgrounds

Same age: Zhukov and Konev were born in the Russian Empire in 1896 and 1897 respectively.

Both came from the country: The two men were of peasant stock. During World War I, they enlisted in the Tsar's army, before later fighting in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, from where they launched their military careers.

Highly decorated: Both Zhukov and Konev were honoured with the order Hero of the Soviet Union, the country's highest award.

Battle didn't go to plan

Marshal Zhukov had every reason to expect a quick victory. With 900,000 men at his disposal, his army was ten times larger than the enemy's. Soviet aircraft also enjoyed a 10:1 advantage, ▶

while the Germans' paltry 512 tanks were no match for the Red Army's 3,000.

The Soviets planned for battle at a conference held from 5th to 7th April at Zhukov's headquarters at a school in Landsberg. The marshal's knowledge of the battlefield terrain came from eight reconnaissance flights, interrogations of German prisoners of war, and documents intercepted by the intelligence service.

Based on the information gathered, the strategists had created a landscape model that the officers used for planning. The model and map revealed to command that the capture of the ridge might be slower than the previous advance, but Zhukov and his officers weren't concerned:

"The victories of our troops in previous battles had given us much confidence. No one doubted that we would sweep aside the whole of the enemy fortifications on the approaches to Berlin," Colonel General Mikhail Katukov later wrote.

One day would be enough to capture the ridge, Zhukov concluded.

The Soviet plan was to launch a surprise attack early in the morning of 16th April, which would allow the Red Army to easily overrun German positions on the ridge. This part of the plan went well, creating panic among German ranks. When the attack started, Second Lieutenant Karl-Hermann Tams was at the front edge of Seelow's defences:

"The whole Oder valley bed shook," he recalled. "The hurricane of fire reached out to the Seelow Heights. It seemed as if the earth were reaching up into the sky like a dense wall… We were soon covered in sand, dirt and glass splinters. None of us had experienced anything like it before, and would not have believed it possible."

Hitler's last stand

> **"The whole Oder valley bed shook."**
>
> L'tenant Karl-Hermann Tams, 1945.

The attack continued, lighting up the night sky with a golden red hue: "In the field of view the eastern sky was in flames," recalled one tank commander.

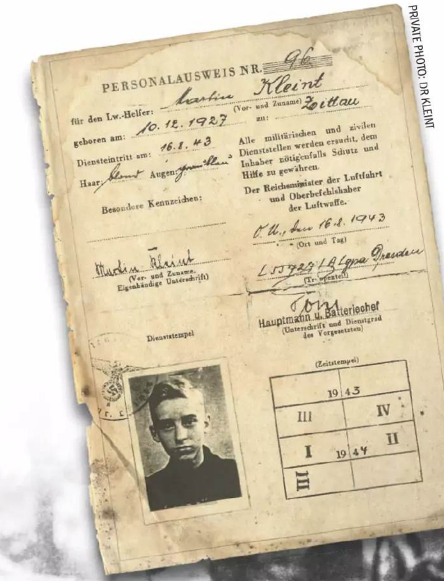
"The night has gone mad," added Friedhelm Schöneck. "The sky is glowing red as if it will crack open at any moment… The ground rocks, heaves and sways like a ship in a Force 10 gale… The bursting and howling of the shells, the whistling and hissing of shrapnel fills the air or what remains of it for us to breathe."

The artillery finally fell silent after two and a half hours. In all, 8,983 Russian guns and mortars had bombarded Seelow Heights and the area immediately north of the ridge with tens of thousands of shells. The Germans had barely responded and for a moment Zhukov believed they'd been crushed.

But the Germans had tricked the Soviets. From prisoner interrogations, they'd learned when the attack would take place, and Heinrici had secretly withdrawn most of his infantry from the front line the previous evening. In this way, he spared his forces to continue the fight against the Soviet advance.

"They pulled back their troops a good eight kilometres. Our artillery hit everything but the enemy," remarked an exasperated Colonel General Vasily Kuznetsov, in command of Zhukov's shock troops.

Nor did the 143 searchlights used by Zhukov to light up the front during the attack have the effect the marshal had hoped for. Instead of blinding the enemy and revealing the German positions, the searchlights exposed the Soviet attackers, who became clearly outlined as dark silhouettes as they advanced.



PERSONALAUSWEIS NR. 96

für den Lw.-Helfer: Martin Kleint (Vor- und Zuname)

zu: Zittau

geboren am: 10.12.1927

Diensteintritt am: 16.8.43

Haar: blond Augen:

Besondere Kennzeichen:

Alle militärischen und zivilen Dienststellen werden ersucht, dem Inhaber nötigenfalls Schutz und Hilfe zu gewähren.

Der Reichsminister der Luftfahrt und Oberbefehlshaber der Luftwaffe.

O.U., den 16.8.1943

(Ort und Tag)

Martin Kleint

(Vor- und Zuname. Eigenhändige Unterschrift)

L 55727 LG Lgpa Dresden

(Tr.)

Hauptmann u. Batteriechef

(Unterschrift und Dienstgrad des Vorgesetzten)

Dienststempel

(Zeitstempel)

19 43	
III	IV
I 19 44	II
III	

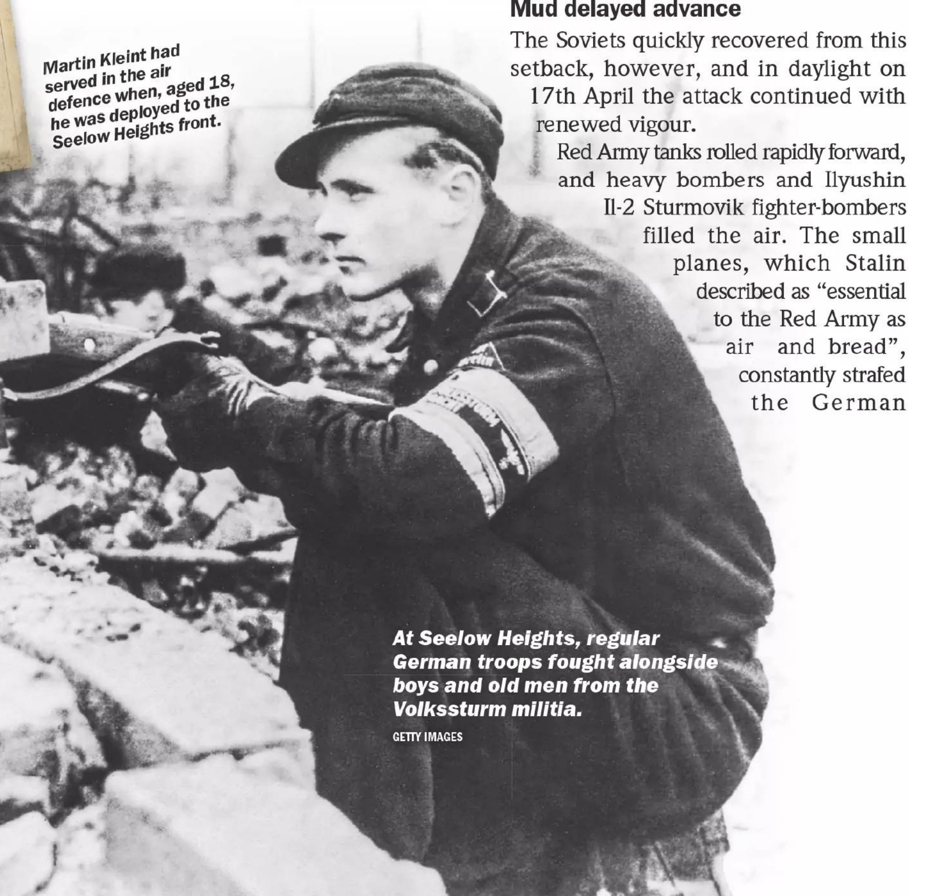
PRIVATE PHOTO: DR KLEINT

Martin Kleint had served in the air defence when, aged 18, he was deployed to the Seelow Heights front.

Mud delayed advance

The Soviets quickly recovered from this setback, however, and in daylight on 17th April the attack continued with renewed vigour.

Red Army tanks rolled rapidly forward, and heavy bombers and Ilyushin Il-2 Sturmovik fighter-bombers filled the air. The small planes, which Stalin described as "essential to the Red Army as air and bread", constantly strafed the German



At Seelow Heights, regular German troops fought alongside boys and old men from the Volkssturm militia.

GETTY IMAGES

GETTY IMAGES, NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND SHUTTERSTOCK

German pilots signed up for kamikaze operations

In 1944, 70 volunteers chose to join the suicide Leonidas squadron. They were first deployed in the Battle of Seelow Heights.

As the war progressed, the Nazis were forced to acknowledge that the Allies were militarily superior. To redress the balance of power, Otto Skorzeny – a senior Nazi specialising in commando operations behind enemy lines – and test pilot Hanna Reitsch proposed that the Luftwaffe set up a suicide unit.

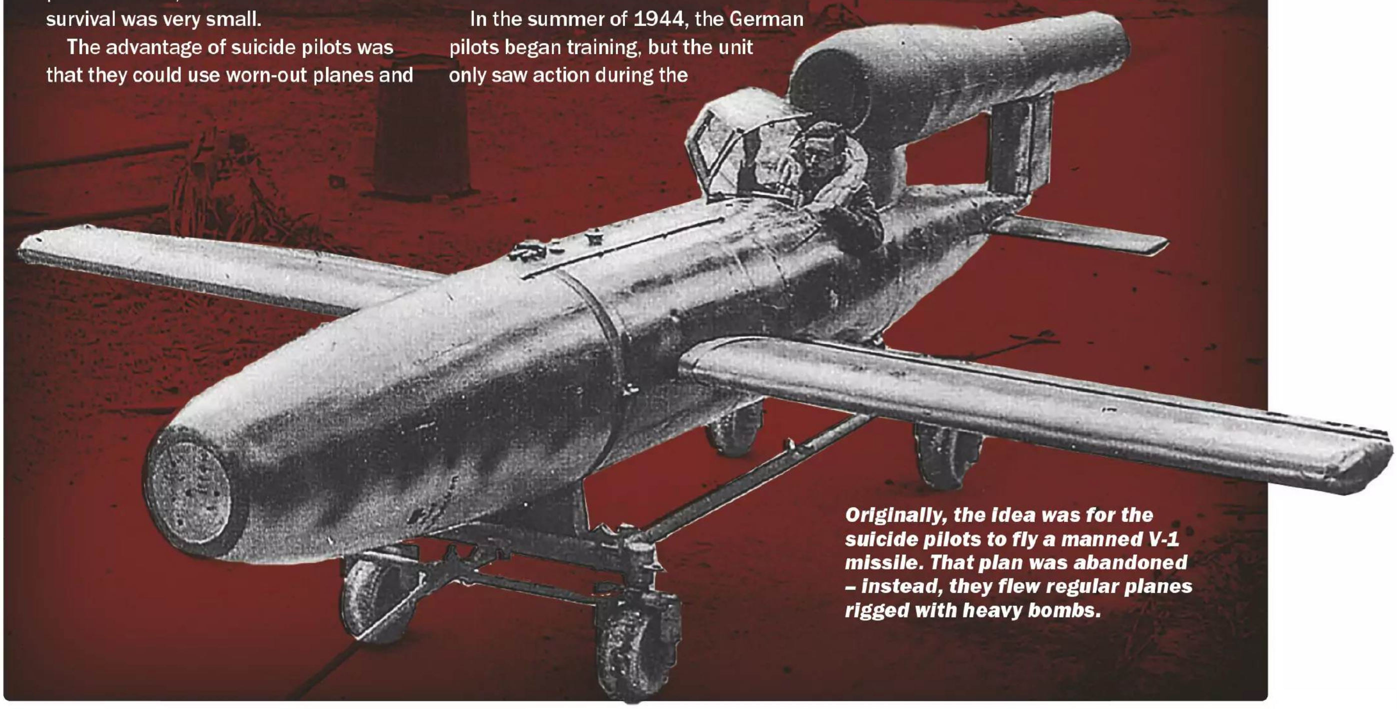
Pilots would steer their aircraft into a target such as a bridge, enemy position or power station. The impact would trigger a large explosive charge in the aircraft. Theoretically, the pilot could parachute out, but their chance of survival was very small.

The advantage of suicide pilots was that they could use worn-out planes and the actions required very little fuel, because the planes only needed enough to reach their target.

Hitler was not enthusiastic about the idea, but still allowed the Luftwaffe to recruit volunteers. In total, 70 signed up for the unit, which was nicknamed the Leonidas Squadron, a reference to ancient Greece, where King Leonidas, with a small force of 300 Spartans, held off the Persian king's huge army at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC. The king and his soldiers were all eventually killed, but their heroism bought the Greeks valuable time.

In the summer of 1944, the German pilots began training, but the unit only saw action during the Battle of Seelow Heights. From 17th to 20th April, the squadron destroyed – according to the Luftwaffe's own figures – 17 bridges over the Oder River, but the figure is probably exaggerated.

The actions cost 35 pilots their lives. Major General Robert Fuchs telegraphed the names of the killed pilots to Hitler on 20th April 1945 as a birthday gift.



Originally, the idea was for the suicide pilots to fly a manned V-1 missile. That plan was abandoned – instead, they flew regular planes rigged with heavy bombs.

Nazi darling came up with the idea

From the 1930s until the end of the war, female test pilot Hanna Reitsch was a star of Nazi propaganda. As a media darling, she was well acquainted with the upper circles of the Nazi regime and was able to personally propose her idea of suicide pilots to Hitler.

Having received Hitler's approval, Reitsch even test-flew a manned version of the V-1 missile in which the suicide pilots were earmarked to fly.

Blonde hair and strong piloting skills made Hanna Reitsch a superstar.

defensive positions. The Germans had few planes and limited fuel, meaning the fight was unequal from the start.

"The Luftwaffe had really supported the troops on the ground with all their might (about 300 machines) but could not stop the Russians from commanding the air," noted 9th Army commander General Theodor Busse.

Soviet planes recorded the day's greatest success when they struck a German ammunition depot, which vanished in a violent explosion of fire and smoke. On the ground, the Red Army fared less well. Its advance met stiff resistance because Germany's leading generals were fully aware of the high ground's great strategic advantages.

"The heights formed the critical point for the Russian armoured forces. Their retention or loss, dependent upon the situation and strengths, would decide the result of the coming battle," Busse had written beforehand.

The Germans fortified the area with everything at their disposal. Before the battle, soldiers had laid mines on fields and other flat stretches that could be used as access roads to the heights. The Germans covered approach roads with positions ready to meet the attackers with artillery and machine-gun fire from several sides. The terrain was also ▶

littered with tank traps in the form of deep trenches. Three metres deep and up to 3.5 metres wide, they posed serious obstacles to the Soviets.

The terrain – made soft and muddy by the spring rains – also aided the Germans: "For the first two kilometres our rifle units and tanks advanced under cover of the moving barrage successfully, though slowly. But then the machines, which had to get past the streams and canals, began to be left behind," reported Colonel General Vassily Chuikov of the Red Army.

Hitler's last stand

"Our [guns] hit everything but the enemy."

Colonel General Kuznetsov on the artillery at Seelow Heights, 1945.

The Soviet soldiers slowly fought their way through a marshy landscape full of craters and bodies from the shelling. Tanks quickly created traffic jams on the few roads that led through the area. In several places, the Red Army was also forced to stop and build bridges before its troops could cross marshland and canals.

Soviets got stuck in the mud

At noon, a tank unit finally managed to penetrate the front line of the German defence to reach the foot of the Seelow Heights. With engines roaring, the gargantuan machines attempted to climb the ridge. They clung on like metal-skinned beetles, but most found the effort too great – the slopes were too steep for the heavy tanks to negotiate.

The tanks turned around and instead tried to snake their way up narrow roads that led to nearby villages. But the Germans had anticipated this move and stood ready with 88-mm guns and infantrymen armed with the recoilless Panzerfaust bazooka, which they could fire from their shoulder. The narrow passages allowed the Germans to concentrate fire directly on the advancing troops – a move that was both effective and saved ammunition.

Zhukov observed the battle from the Reitwein Spur, a ridge behind the front. From his command post in a primitive bunker, the marshal watched the tanks struggle through his powerful ▶

STRENGTH RATIO

SOVIET UNION*		GERMANY	
Soldiers:	900,000	Soldiers:	90,836
Tanks:	3,059	Tanks:	512
Guns and rockets:	17,824	Guns and rockets:	2,625
Aircraft:	3,000	Aircraft:	300

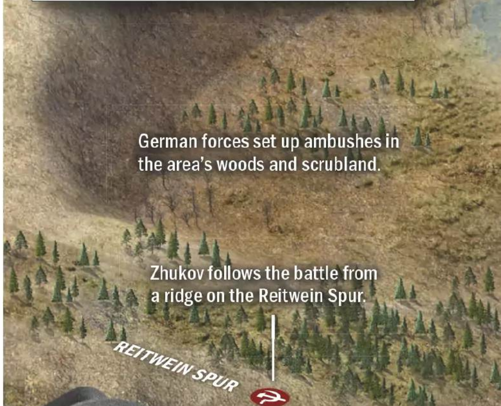
*Figures are a combined total of Marshal Zhukov's and Konev's armies advancing towards Berlin from the east and south.

The Soviets depended on tanks for the upcoming battle for Berlin.

GETTY IMAGES

3 Seelow Heights is the last stop before Berlin

On 16th April, the Red Army finally reaches the Seelow Heights. Despite massive bombardments, the Germans' defensive lines are not destroyed. The path across the floodplain to the ridge will therefore prove costly for Soviet troops. On 17th April they reach the ridge itself, which proves too steep for the tanks. Instead, they have to use the small, winding roads where the Germans lie in wait. It's not until 19th April that the Red Army breaks through. The road to Berlin is open.


German forces set up ambushes in the area's woods and scrubland.

Zhukov follows the battle from a ridge on the Reitwein Spur.

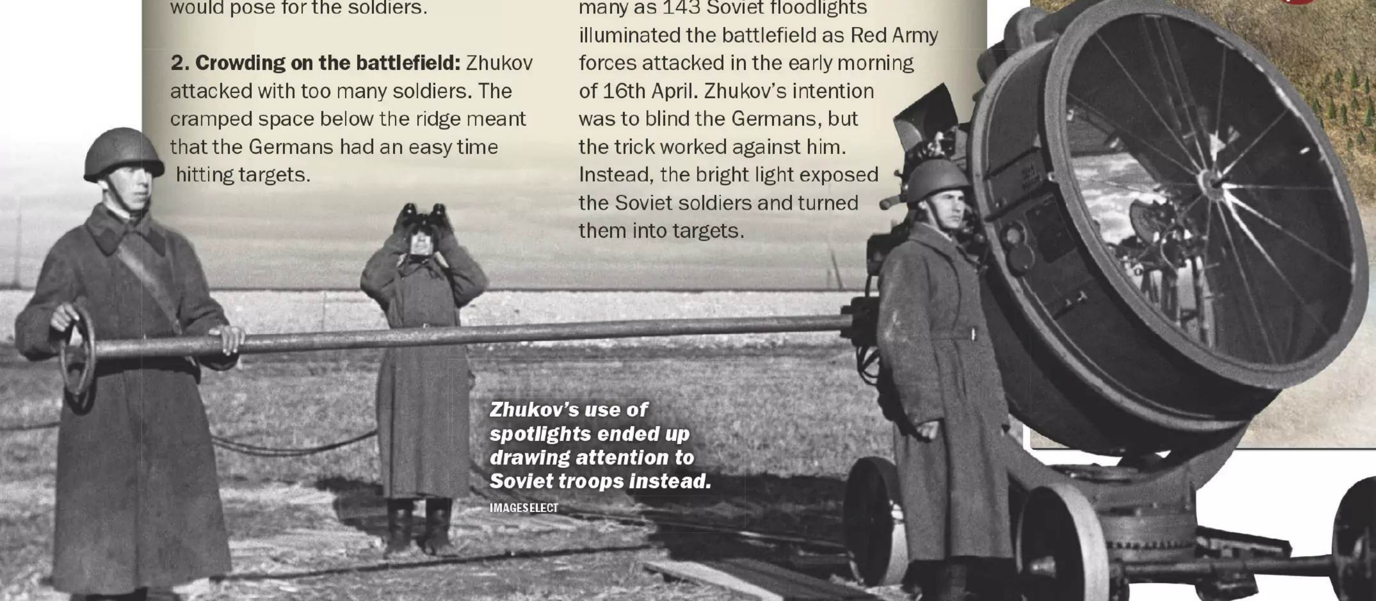
4 wrong decisions delayed Zhukov

1. Inadequate intelligence: Usually Soviet intelligence officers surveyed an area thoroughly before an offensive, but this time Zhukov made do with accounts from prisoners of war and aerial photographs that failed to give a realistic impression of the difficulties the ridge and its surrounding terrain would pose for the soldiers.

2. Crowding on the battlefield: Zhukov attacked with too many soldiers. The cramped space below the ridge meant that the Germans had an easy time hitting targets.

3. The Germans knew the attack plans: Soviet POWs and intercepted documents revealed when Zhukov would attack. German soldiers were pulled back just before the Red Army launched its first bombardment on 16th April.

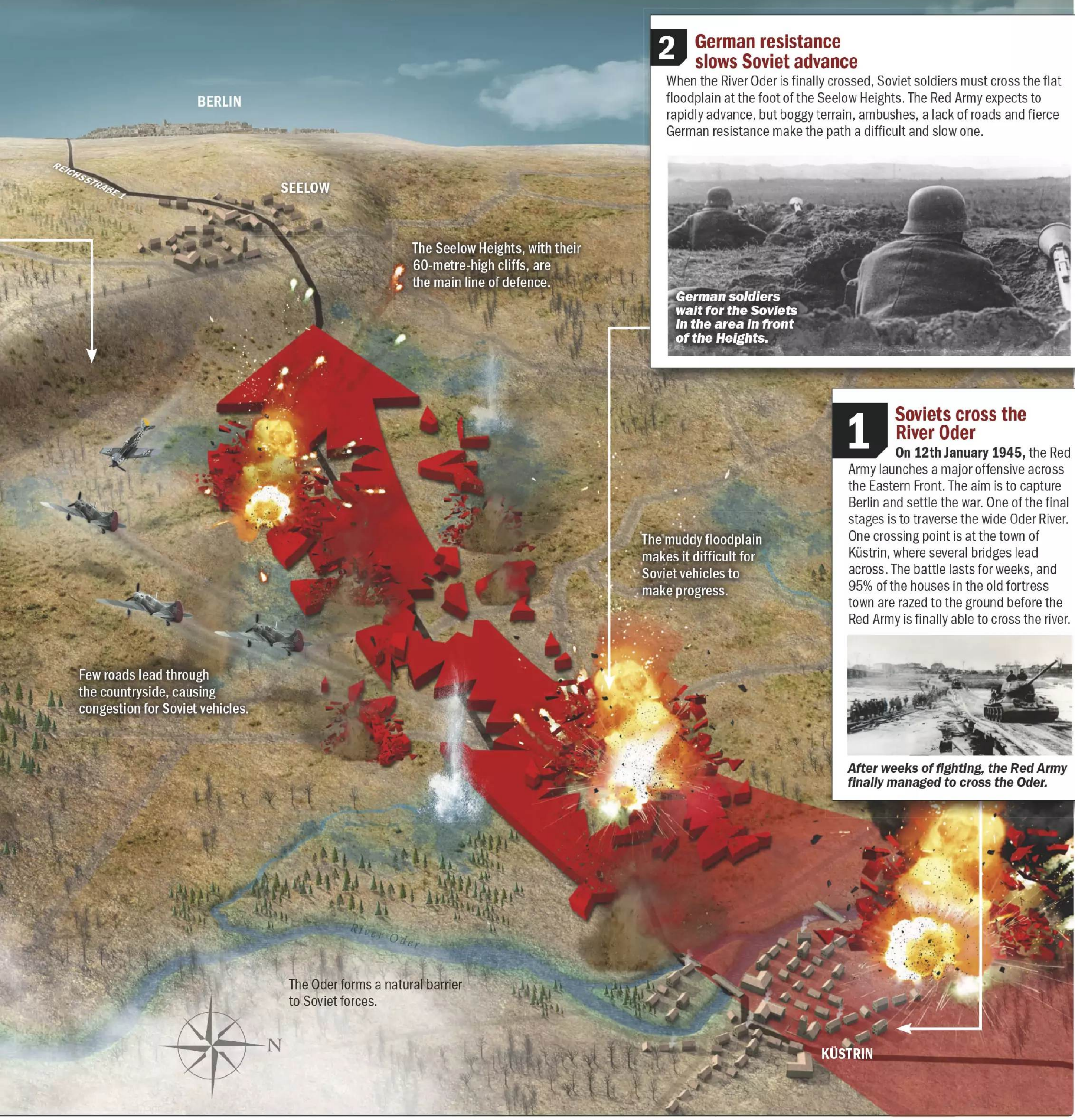
4. Floodlights on the battlefield: As many as 143 Soviet floodlights illuminated the battlefield as Red Army forces attacked in the early morning of 16th April. Zhukov's intention was to blind the Germans, but the trick worked against him. Instead, the bright light exposed the Soviet soldiers and turned them into targets.


Zhukov's use of spotlights ended up drawing attention to Soviet troops instead.

IMAGESELECT

Terrain helped the Germans

Mud, swamp and high, steep slopes – the terrain west of the River Oder provided a natural defence that even the most tenacious army would find difficult to penetrate. The Germans took full advantage of the landscape to put up stubborn resistance to the Red Army.



The Seelow Heights, with their 60-metre-high cliffs, are the main line of defence.

The muddy floodplain makes it difficult for Soviet vehicles to make progress.

Few roads lead through the countryside, causing congestion for Soviet vehicles.

The Oder forms a natural barrier to Soviet forces.

2 German resistance slows Soviet advance

When the River Oder is finally crossed, Soviet soldiers must cross the flat floodplain at the foot of the Seelow Heights. The Red Army expects to rapidly advance, but boggy terrain, ambushes, a lack of roads and fierce German resistance make the path a difficult and slow one.

German soldiers wait for the Soviets in the area in front of the Heights.

SZ PHOTO/RITZAU

1 Soviets cross the River Oder

On 12th January 1945, the Red Army launches a major offensive across the Eastern Front. The aim is to capture Berlin and settle the war. One of the final stages is to traverse the wide Oder River. One crossing point is at the town of Küstrin, where several bridges lead across. The battle lasts for weeks, and 95% of the houses in the old fortress town are razed to the ground before the Red Army is finally able to cross the river.

After weeks of fighting, the Red Army finally managed to cross the Oder.

DPA/RITZAU SCANPIX

CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE

The floodplain in front of the Seelow Heights was filled with hidden German artillery positions.

IMAGESELECT

binoculars. The aerial photographs he'd used to plan the attack had failed to provide an accurate picture of the terrain – and in particular, the true gradient of the slopes. The lack of progress was delaying the attack and threatened to jeopardise Stalin's whole plan.

Zhukov knew that Stalin expected him to capture Berlin before the US arrived. If the Americans took the capital, the Soviets would lose face and might miss out on important military secrets, such as knowledge of the German nuclear programme. And Zhukov could expect an uncertain future if he failed to live up to Stalin's expectations.

When Chuikov, one of Zhukov's most trusted officers, reported in a daze that his troops were barely moving, Zhukov exploded: "What the hell do you mean – your troops are pinned down?"

Chuikov was aware of Zhukov's fiery temper, and responded calmly: "Comrade Marshal, whether we are pinned down temporarily or not, the offensive will most certainly succeed. But resistance has stiffened for the moment and is holding us up."

Chuikov's words did not reassure Zhukov about the lack of progress. His mood wasn't helped by a mid-afternoon radio call with Stalin: "So you've underestimated the enemy on the Berlin axis," the dictator remarked coolly. "I was thinking that you were already on the approaches to Berlin, but you're still on the Seelow Heights. Things have started more successfully for Konev," he added acidly, a reference to Zhukov's rival, Ivan Konev, whose forces were heading towards Berlin from the south.

Hitler's last stand

"What the hell do you mean – your troops are pinned down?"

Marshal Zhukov to Colonel General Vassily Chuikov, 1945.

As the day progressed, rain made the terrain even boggier. Panicked by the impasse, Zhukov changed the attack plan so that two tank armies could advance ahead of the slow infantry in the hope of achieving a breakthrough.

The result was chaos. The tank armies found themselves trapped behind the vehicles of two other armies, and officers in charge of traffic control had no idea who to wave forward and who to hold back.

Those tanks that did get through soon became prey to the German defences. In the confusion, they were ambushed and came under heavy fire from German soldiers. When darkness fell, despite Zhukov's efforts, Seelow Heights remained firmly in German hands.

Suicide pilots shocked the Soviets

That evening Zhukov spoke again to Stalin over the radio-telephone: "By the end of the day, tomorrow, 17th April, the defence of Seelow Heights will be broken," the marshal promised.

"I am convinced that the more troops the enemy sends against us here, the easier it will be to capture Berlin. It is much easier to destroy troops in open countryside than in a fortified city," Zhukov added, trying to convince Stalin that the situation was under control.

Next morning dawned with clear blue skies – ideal weather for the superior Soviet bombers.

"Dawn brought yet another blast of artillery fire, which was supplemented and supported by wave after wave of bombing attacks by heavy aircraft. It was horrific," recalled Lieutenant Tams. The bombers were accompanied by the smaller Ilyushin Il-2 ground attack ►

AKG-IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

A few days after the breakthrough at Seelow Heights, Soviet troops fought on the streets of Berlin.

aircraft, which swarmed over the trenches on Seelow Heights. Along the Oder, houses and villages continued to burn from the previous day's attack. The smell of burning flesh from livestock hung heavy over the floodplain.

To counter the Soviet onslaught, the Germans sent all the Focke-Wulf fighters they could into the air. German pilots were tasked with destroying the bridges that brought fresh Red Army troops and supplies across the Oder.

The Soviets observed a completely unexpected phenomenon – suicide pilots: "German pilots frequently death-dive into Russian bombers, causing both [to] plunge flaming groundwards," one unnamed source reported.

While some of Zhukov's forces attacked the centre of the front line, other Red Army units moved against the flanks. General Busse had been promised reinforcements the day before, and troops from SS-Division Nordland, a unit composed mainly of Scandinavian and Estonian volunteers, finally appeared.

Danish gunner Hans Hansen was deployed with his battery to the village of Dolgelin, located in the area that formed the right flank of the defence, between Seelow itself and Zhukov's command post. As they were pushed back, Hansen saw flashes of light from battles to the west, where the US army was advancing.

Hansen and other soldiers in the area – including Private Martin Kleint – dug themselves into positions outside Dolgelin, which burned after the Soviet bombardment. Throughout the morning they were subject to more artillery fire, but at 10.00 things became serious.

"Eventually the artillery fire broke off, and the Russian storm troops appeared immediately [attacking] with their excited cries of 'Hooray! Hooray!'," Hansen subsequently recalled.

The German soldiers successfully defended themselves against the advancing enemy, and when the Soviets were finally driven back, Kleint and his unit took the opportunity to enter the village, where they entrenched themselves in the railway station. Here they took what respite they could overnight, knowing full well the battle was not yet over.

Numerical superiority ensured victory

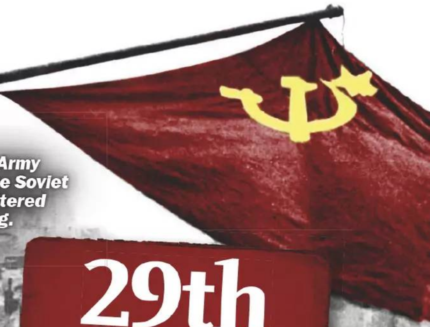
As darkness descended, frustration rose in both camps. General Busse knew the 9th Army couldn't hold out much longer as the death toll mounted. The Soviets estimated that on the second day of the battle – 17th April – they'd killed 3,200 Germans at Seelow. But at the same time, Zhukov was troubled by the fact he'd not been able to keep his promise to Stalin.

Although the Red Army was slowly gaining ground, Seelow Heights was not yet in Soviet hands. The marshal knew that Stalin's patience would not last much longer. It was now or never.

On the morning of 18th April, Zhukov ordered his soldiers to drive their guns

Berlin fell in a week

Only 19 days passed from the German defeat at Seelow Heights until General Alfred Jodl signed the country's surrender. During that period, Hitler had committed suicide and Berlin had been bombed beyond all recognition.



On 2nd May, Red Army soldiers raised the Soviet flag over the shattered German Reichstag.

20th APRIL

The Battle of Seelow Heights is lost, and Zhukov fires the first shells at Berlin.

21st APRIL

Zhukov and his 1st Belarusian Front reach the outskirts of Berlin. Here civilians take up the fight.

23rd APRIL

Fierce fighting takes place in the city's outer districts. One by one, they fall to the Soviets.

25th APRIL

The Red Army surrounds Berlin, where two million German civilians have remained.

29th APRIL

Soviet troops cross the Moltke Bridge over the River Spree near the site of today's main railway station. From here, the Red Army pours into Berlin's streets, where mainly women, children and old people are all who remain.

and rocket batteries as far forward as they could. At the same time, he ordered his soldiers to advance in even greater numbers and to keep going until their objective had been reached.

Following a similar artillery bombardment and air strike to that of previous days, the Red Army attacked with full force. The Germans continued to hold out along the defensive line on its flanks at the towns of Frankfurt (Oder) in the south, and Wriezen in the north. In the centre, however, the defending troops began to fall back and give way to the masses of Soviet soldiers and artillery pressing them. By mid-morning, at 09.40, the duty officer at Army Group Vistula headquarters received the message that "leading enemy armoured groups had broken through". The Red Army were now on Reichsstraße 1 and the direct road to Berlin.

Hitler's last stand

"It is not I who have lost ... but the German people!"

Adolf Hitler to his officers in the Führerbunker on 22 April 1945.

SS-Division Nordland had just reached the area west of the town of Seelow when "no sooner had we arrived than the Russians attacked head-on with a large armoured force", reported Hans Hansen.

Although Hansen's force was able to train its 88-mm anti-tank weapons on the Soviets, the tanks simply changed direction, turning westwards unopposed.

"There was no doubt where they were going: to Berlin!" he recounted.

German commanders had the same intelligence, and after conferring with Basse, General Heinrici called Hitler at noon to request reinforcements. He received the discouraging reply that the only available soldiers were the Volkssturm militia.

The young boys and older men duly marched out of Berlin the following day. Meanwhile, the Germans persisted in their resistance. Any Soviet soldiers who got through the line were met by ambushes. At the village of Reichenberg, two SS battalions managed to defeat as many as 50 Soviet tanks. On the right flank, Private Kleint and his comrades defended Dolgelin tenaciously.

Kleint wrote in his diary how once battle was joined, there was no respite. The Soviets started with a barrage from the Katyusha batteries, and during fighting it became difficult to tell between friend and foe. A new wave of Soviet aircraft bombed the troops from above before the order came to withdraw.

Kleint braved the bombs and Soviet machine guns to make it to his old position, now outside the line of fire, unharmed. Against all odds, he had survived the bloody battle.

Victory was costly

By 19th April, the German 9th Army was in retreat. The battle was lost. The roads were in chaos as tanks, trucks, infantrymen and refugees scrambled westwards – away from the advancing Red Army. Amid the confusion, military police and SS soldiers began a manhunt for deserters, mercilessly shooting them or hanging them from roadside trees.

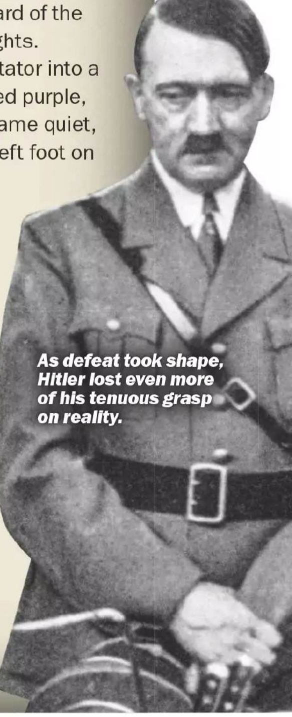
Five days later, the 9th Army found itself in the Spreewald Forest south-east of Berlin, surrounded by the Red Army. The soldiers had to fight their way west to surrender to US forces and avoid Soviet captivity, which few would survive. The breakout culminated in the Battle of Halbe, south of Berlin.

Hitler had nervous breakdown once defeat was final

"It is not I who have lost the war, but the German people!" yelled a fuming Adolf Hitler during a meeting in the Führerbunker after he heard of the defeat at the Seelow Heights.

The news threw the dictator into a rage: "Then his face turned purple, his twitching left arm became quiet, and he could not put his left foot on the ground properly," an unnamed source told British intelligence after the war.

Hitler accused the army leadership of being incompetent and deceitful, and he believed that the German people deserved to "perish". After his outburst, Hitler slumped in his chair. The source believed he had suffered a nervous breakdown.



As defeat took shape, Hitler lost even more of his tenuous grasp on reality.

IMAGESELECT

Around 60,000 of the 9th Army's remaining 210,000 men were killed in the battle, which lasted from 24th April to 1st May; 125,000 ended up in Soviet captivity, while 25,000 escaped. Among the lucky ones was Martin Kleint. He didn't have a single bullet left.

The Battle of Seelow Heights cost the Germans 12,000 men. Soviet casualties were much higher: some 30,000 Soviet soldiers died in the battle, but for Stalin the death toll meant little. Zhukov's victory was the main thing, and the marshal was richly rewarded for his efforts: he had the honour of receiving the Germans' declaration of surrender on 8th May, and later became the first commander of the Soviet occupation zone in Germany.

A few years later, however, Zhukov fell from grace. His war effort had made him more popular than Stalin himself, so the dictator dismissed him from his post in Berlin and sent him far away. Zhukov was to take up the post commanding the Odessa Military District.

Zhukov
Montgomery

A month after the German surrender, Marshal Zhukov met with British Field Marshal Montgomery in Berlin.

IMAGESELECT

30th APRIL

Realising that all hope is lost, Adolf Hitler shoots himself in the Führerbunker.

2nd MAY

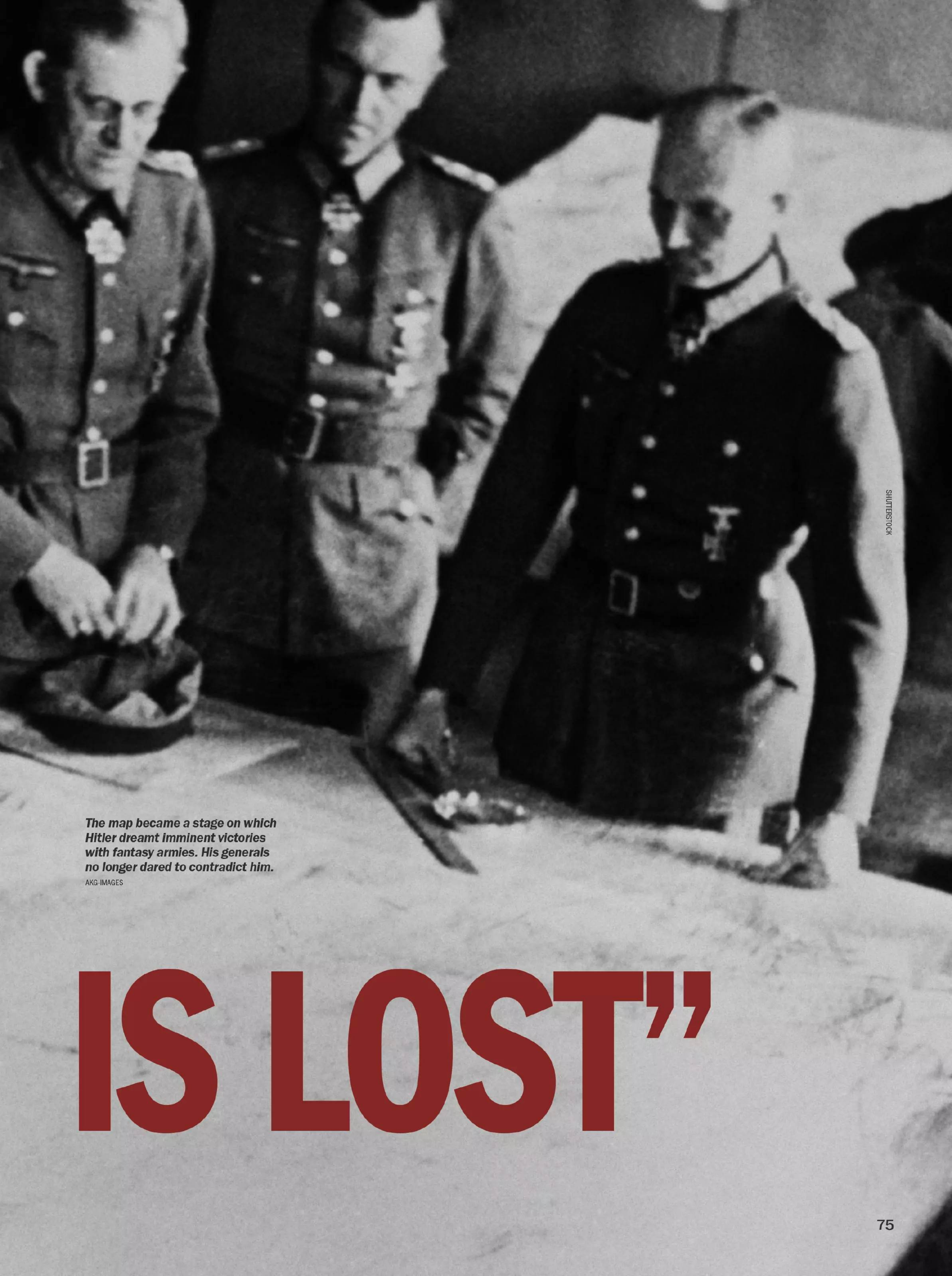
The Red Army declares Berlin captured. Soldiers hoist the Soviet flag over the Reichstag.

7th MAY

Colonel General Alfred Jodl signs the German Instrument of Surrender in Reims, France.

At around 15.00 on 22nd April 1945, Hitler went into meltdown in the Führerbunker. The German generals no longer obeyed him. No one wanted to come to Berlin's rescue, instead they fled from the Red Army.

Adolf Hitler must face disaster: "THE WAR



The map became a stage on which Hitler dreamt imminent victories with fantasy armies. His generals no longer dared to contradict him.

AKG-IMAGES

SHUTTERSTOCK

IS LOST”

BY ESBEN MØNSTER-KJÆR

The light of the almost full moon made it easy to spy the footprints in the snow. They'd been left by German farmers who'd crossed the frozen Oder River to collect firewood on the eastern bank. Now the Soviet soldiers could follow them westwards – over the dangerous ice. From here the force was able to sneak up the riverbank unseen. It appeared that no Germans had realised that the Red Army's spearhead had come so close.

It was early morning on 31st January 1945 when Colonel Khariton Esipenko entered the small town of Kienitz. Only the baker and his son-in-law were up, while the crew of a German train equipped with anti-aircraft guns slept on.

As soon as the German stationmaster left his bed, he strode firmly towards Colonel Esipenko.

"Are you going to allow the Berlin train to leave?" the official asked. Soviet troops in the streets were bad enough, but in the stationmaster's universe, disasters only occurred when a train failed to keep to its schedule.

"I am sorry, Station Master, but that is impossible", Esipenko replied. "The passenger service to Berlin will undergo a short interruption – let's say until the end of the war."

Later that day, more Soviet forces crossed the Oder further south. Now two bridgeheads had been created on the river's western bank, which had previously been the Germans' bulwark against the Red Army. Hitler's Berlin was just 67 kilometres away and the stage was now set for the Third Reich's death throes. Only at this point did Germany's generals begin to consider whether they would sacrifice their men in the inevitable disaster.

Failed plot had bloody consequences

Senior German officers had long viewed the war's progress with despondency, and many cursed Hitler's orders, which were increasingly out of step with reality. Still, they obeyed, because in Nazi Germany, resistance could be deadly: the Führer had neither forgotten nor forgiven that a conspiracy of officers around Colonel von Stauffenberg had tried to blow him up in Ulveskansen back in July 1944.

> **"You will see – the Russians are about to suffer the bloodiest defeat of their history at the gates of Berlin!"**
>
> Adolf Hitler, when he still believed SS General Felix Steiner would save Berlin.

Miraculously, Hitler escaped with superficial injuries – the real victim of the explosion was the German officer corps. In the past, generals had enjoyed a certain freedom of action when the Führer's orders had to be implemented on the battlefield. With Stauffenberg's bomb, that confidence died.

"The circle that comprises these usurpers is extremely small," Hitler assured in a radio address after the assassination. "It is a very small clique of

Pilots sent on a suicide mission

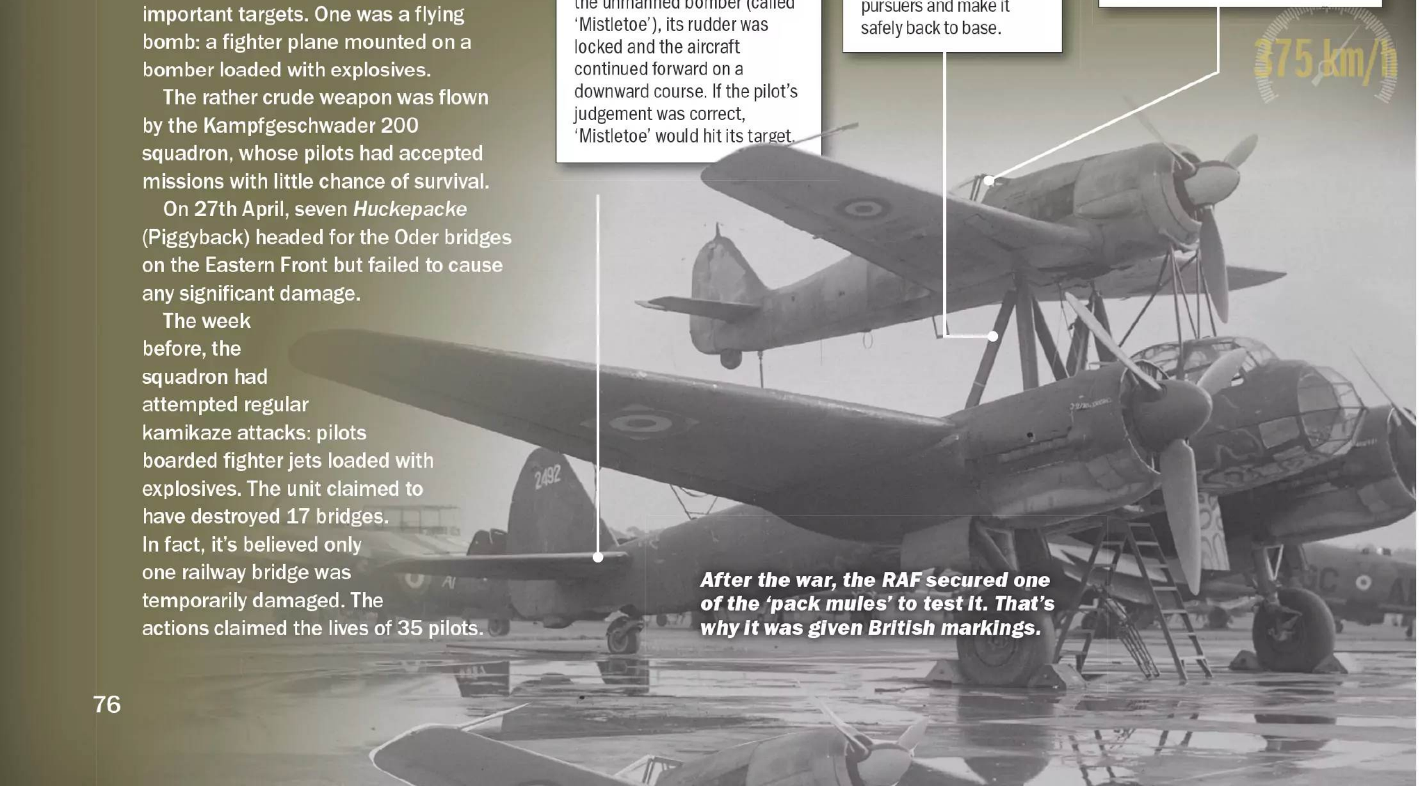
The Luftwaffe used every means to destroy the bridges over the Oder River. Kamikaze actions were designed to cut the Red Army's supply lines.

As time ran out, the Luftwaffe developed several kamikaze weapons for use against particularly important targets. One was a flying bomb: a fighter plane mounted on a bomber loaded with explosives.

The rather crude weapon was flown by the Kampfgeschwader 200 squadron, whose pilots had accepted missions with little chance of survival.

On 27th April, seven *Huckepacke* (Piggyback) headed for the Oder bridges on the Eastern Front but failed to cause any significant damage.

The week before, the squadron had attempted regular kamikaze attacks: pilots boarded fighter jets loaded with explosives. The unit claimed to have destroyed 17 bridges. In fact, it's believed only one railway bridge was temporarily damaged. The actions claimed the lives of 35 pilots.



1 Pilot controlled two planes at once

From his seat in the fighter (called the 'pack mule'), the pilot also controlled the bomber attached beneath. Its top speed of just 375 km/h made him easy prey.

2 Bomber was released

About 1 km from the target, the pilot released his fighter and his mission was complete. He now had to try to shake off pursuers and make it safely back to base.

3 Rudder locked

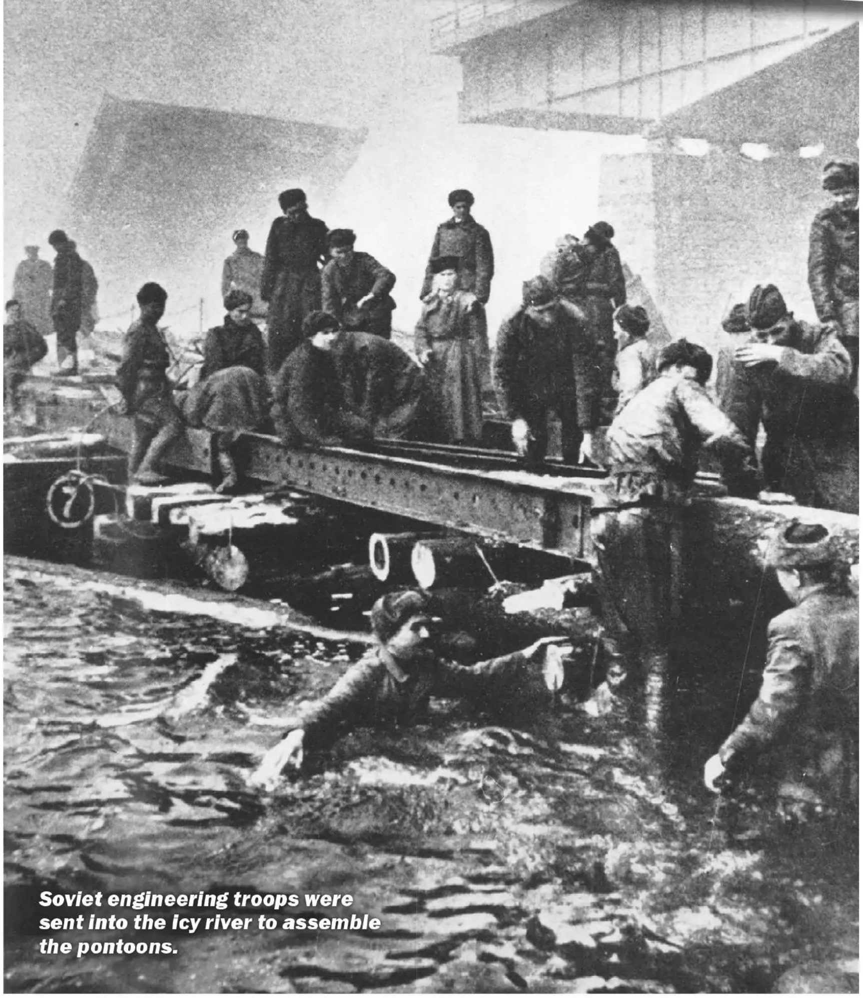
Once the pilot released the unmanned bomber (called 'Mistletoe'), its rudder was locked and the aircraft continued forward on a downward course. If the pilot's judgement was correct, 'Mistletoe' would hit its target.

After the war, the RAF secured one of the 'pack mules' to test it. That's why it was given British markings.

FOX PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

Pontoon bridges ensured that the Red Army could transport material across the Oder.

ULLSTEIN BILD/RITZAU SCANPIX



Soviet engineering troops were sent into the icy river to assemble the pontoons.

ULLSTEIN BILD/RITZAU SCANPIX

criminal elements, which will now be exterminated quite mercilessly."

But the Führer's words concealed the fact that he no longer trusted his officers, and the ranks would be combed by the Gestapo in search of accomplices. The rest of the army understood Hitler's signal: From now on, every order had to be obeyed to the last word – otherwise there would be unpleasant consequences for those responsible.

In the spring of 1945, however, the situation called for a commander who could improvise and make the most of Germany's weakened army. The Führer's choice fell on 58-year-old Gotthard Heinrici – even though Hitler lacked faith in the general, who was devoutly religious and organised church services for his soldiers. But Heinrici mastered defensive warfare and was given command of Army Group Vistula, which defended the front along the Oder River.

Meanwhile, the Red Army amassed a huge fighting force in the bridgeheads it had won on the river's western bank. To cover the last kilometres to the Reich capital Berlin, the tanks first had to cross the Seelow ridge, where one of the German armies had dug in.

Barricades also sprang up inside the Reich capital itself. They were to be manned by troops from Army Group Vistula if the Soviets managed to fight their way through Seelow. Therefore, a delegation from Berlin's city commander arrived to draw up a joint defence plan.

"Those madmen in Berlin should stew in their own juice", Heinrici's chief of staff said in response. The delegation was sent on to Seelow, where the officers of the 9th Army offered Nazi slogans instead of realistic promises: "The 9th Army stands and stays on the Oder. If it should be necessary, we will fall there, but we will not retreat." The words sounded hollow, but they were like something out of a Hitler speech, so no one dared question them.

General Heinrici intended to hold the Selow high ground for as long as possible, but he had probably already begun to consider how hard he was prepared to fight in the futile attempt to save Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Stalin's troops paid dearly

The storm against Seelow broke in the early morning of 16th April. 15,000 guns hammered away at the German positions.

"The whole Oder valley bed shook", a young German officer recounted. "It seemed as if the earth was reaching up into the sky like a dense wall. Everything around us started dancing, rattling about ... None of us had experienced anything like it before, and would not have believed it possible."

Then the guns fell silent and a flood of 700,000 brown-clad soldiers surged forward with the battle cry, "To Berlin!"

Heinrici and General Theodor Busse, who led the 9th Army, had secretly withdrawn the German soldiers from their forward positions. As a result, the Red Army's bombardment caused only minor casualties, and when Soviet units advanced through the shattered landscape afterwards, they were met with heavy fire from intact German positions behind them. At the same time, the Luftwaffe directed some of its last forces towards the bridges over the Oder, the lifeblood of the Soviet forces. Some pilots sacrificed themselves in Japanese-inspired kamikaze attacks.

The triumphant German reports of 17 destroyed bridges were wildly exaggerated – according to Soviet sources, only one was hit. Nothing could stop the Red Army as they painstakingly made their way over the Seelow ridge. After three days of fierce fighting in which 30,000 Soviets were killed, the road to Berlin was opened.

The Soviet breakthrough at Seelow had cut Henrici's force in half. He stood north of the gap with a single army, while General Busse and the remnants of the 9th Army were pushed south, and only a few divisions could move back to assist with the defence of Berlin. Some of the soldiers belonged to SS Division ▶

Hitler summoned his armies home to Berlin

As Stalin's troops surrounded Berlin, Hitler had the idea for a decisive battle. His generals would break through and crush the Soviet hordes. In one fell swoop, the fortunes of war would change - or so Hitler thought. But his generals no longer obeyed him...

THOUGHT CO.

Heinrici became a researcher and gathered operational intelligence from the war for the United States.

Fled to Flensburg

GOTTHARD HEINRICI

Rank: Colonel General, commander of the remnants of Army Group Vistula.

Position: Prenzlau, north of Berlin.

1 **Henrici's betrayal:** The general saw no reason to sacrifice more soldiers in a lost war. He sent false reports to Hitler while his army escaped and surrendered to the British. Heinrici himself fled to Flensburg, where, after Hitler's death, Grand Admiral Dönitz assumed the position of German Reich President.

ULLSTEIN BILD DH/ GETTY IMAGES

Refused to follow orders

The former army officer had built up the Waffen-SS. After the war, he helped former SS soldiers.

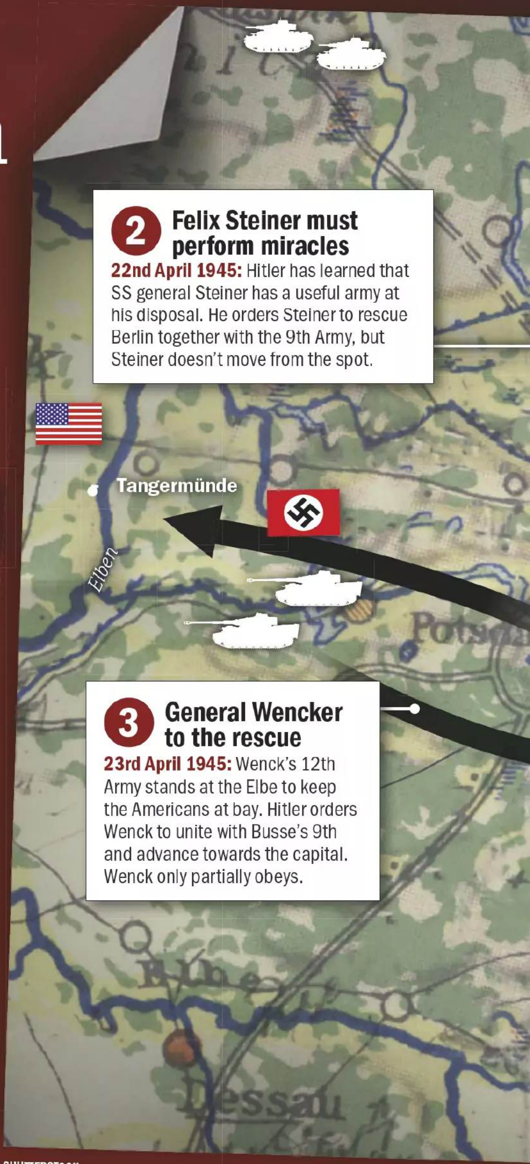
FELIX STEINER

Rank: SS-Obergruppenführer, commanding Army Detachment Steiner.

Position: Oranienburg, north of Berlin.

Strength: A few thousand men.

2 **Steiner spoke out:** The SS general knew he had no chance of entering Berlin and deciding its fate. Instead, he ordered his men northwards – away from Berlin to avoid Soviet captivity. On 3rd May 1945, Army Detachment Steiner surrendered on the Elbe.



2 Felix Steiner must perform miracles

22nd April 1945: Hitler has learned that SS general Steiner has a useful army at his disposal. He orders Steiner to rescue Berlin together with the 9th Army, but Steiner doesn't move from the spot.

3 General Wencker to the rescue

23rd April 1945: Wenck's 12th Army stands at the Elbe to keep the Americans at bay. Hitler orders Wenck to unite with Busse's 9th and advance towards the capital. Wenck only partially obeys.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Nordland, which included many volunteers from Denmark and Norway.

On 20th April, Busse radioed that his units would create a new line of defence in the Spreewald south-east of Berlin. Heinrici urged him to continue the retreat instead, as the Red Army was advancing between him and Berlin – the 9th Army risked being surrounded, but Busse did not dare to retreat. He had once experienced being schooled in the Führerbunker – another outburst could be fatal for the general.

Heinrici believed that the 9th Army was doomed. He had to concentrate on the front north of Berlin, where Soviet armoured vehicles were also advancing. To ward off the threat, he began assembling a reserve under SS-Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner, but Hitler spotted this and began making his own plans with the soldiers.

Steiner seemed to be the perfect man in a time of need. In the 1930s, he had helped found the SS's military branch, the Waffen-SS. The Führer trusted him more than any of the other suspect army generals, who were unable to translate his strategy into victory.

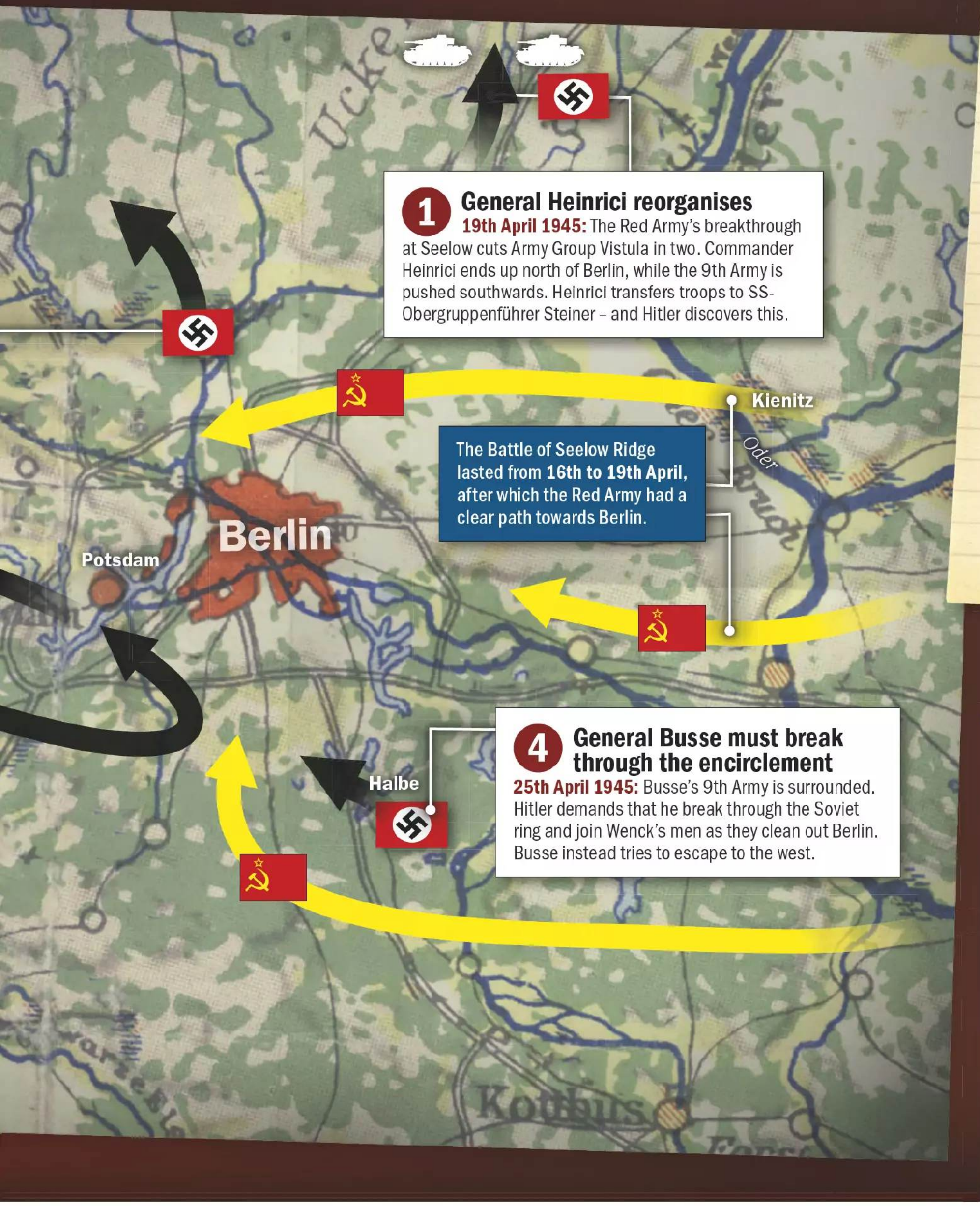
SS general on a suicide mission

On 22nd April, Hitler ordered Steiner to attack the Soviet troops north of Berlin. The enemy's long advancing convoy was a vulnerable target and, according to Hitler, Army Detachment Steiner should be able to easily cut through it and reach Berlin. The term 'Army Detachment' was invented for the occasion – it was roughly half the size of an army.

"Any withdrawal to the west by any section is expressly forbidden", Hitler ordered. "You, personally, are answerable with your head for the execution of this order. The fate of the Reich capital depends on the success of your mission."

On the map, the plan seemed tactically sound and Hitler was pleased with himself. The staff officers around him in the Führerbunker witnessed a dictator more optimistic than he'd been for a long time.

"You will see – the Russians are about to suffer the bloodiest defeat of their history at the gates of Berlin!" Hitler predicted.



1 **General Heinrici reorganises**
19th April 1945: The Red Army's breakthrough at Seelow cuts Army Group Vistula in two. Commander Heinrici ends up north of Berlin, while the 9th Army is pushed southwards. Heinrici transfers troops to SS-Obergruppenführer Steiner – and Hitler discovers this.

The Battle of Seelow Ridge lasted from **16th to 19th April**, after which the Red Army had a clear path towards Berlin.

4 **General Busse must break through the encirclement**
25th April 1945: Busse's 9th Army is surrounded. Hitler demands that he break through the Soviet ring and join Wenck's men as they clean out Berlin. Busse instead tries to escape to the west.

SCHERL/SZ PHOTO/RITZAU SCANPIX

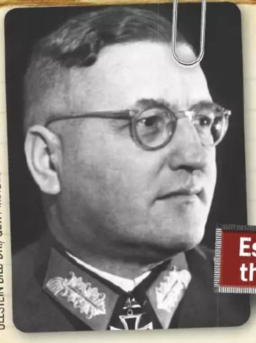
Wenck joined the Diehl Group as director of weapons production.

Helped Busse to escape

WALTHER WENCK

Rank: General, commander of the 12th Army.
Position: On the Elbe, west of Berlin.
Strength: Up to 100,000.

3 **Wenck's initiative:** Hitler ordered the 12th Army to Berlin, but instead of making a futile attempt to save the capital, Wenck helped General Busse's army with its breakout attempt. He also evacuated 3,000 wounded soldiers from the hospital in Belitz. Everyone then fled to the Elbe to surrender to US forces.


ULLSTEIN BILD DH./GETTY IMAGES

Busse made it across the Elbe, where he surrendered – gaining senior positions in the West German army and publishing history books.

Escaped from the Red Army

THEODOR BUSSE

Rank: General, commander of the 9th Army.
Position: Surrounded in Halbe, south of Berlin.
Strength: 80.000 men.

4 **Busse's decision:** The 9th Army was trapped in the woods near the village of Halbe. As the Red Army showered the Germans with rockets and shells, they tried to escape the trap. 40,000 German soldiers perished. An unknown number were rescued by Wenck, the rest ended up in Soviet captivity.

However, he would be in for one of the biggest disappointments of his life, because the Red Army could pump troops through the Seelow Gap unhindered, and Steiner's best divisions were already under attack themselves. The rest of his army division existed only on paper.

Steiner bitterly informed Heinrici that he had barely any artillery, only a handful of tanks and a few anti-aircraft guns. An attack would only comprise a few thousand lightly armed SS soldiers and an untrained Luftwaffe division. Steiner refused to send them to their deaths.

Truth brought Hitler to his knees

In the Führerbunker, the day went by as usual on 22nd April. Hitler got up, after which his spent his time in meetings while subservient staff officers worked to prevent Heinrici from getting through on the phone.

The moment of truth finally arrived at 15.00, when Hitler met with the military's high command. Here, the weak-willed Chief of General Staff Wilhelm Keitel and the other 'yes men' in the Führerbunker had to admit that Steiner hadn't followed orders. Hitler went berserk.

"Hitler leaped up and down and began to rant and rave", staff officer Gerhard Boldt recounted after the war. "He turned alternately deathly pale and purple in the face, shaking in every limb. His voice cracked and he screamed of disloyalty, cowardice, treachery and insubordination."

In the end, Hitler vowed that he would stay and fight in Berlin. Everyone else could just flee if they wanted to. Then he slumped in a chair.

"It is all over. The war is lost. I shall shoot myself", he muttered to himself.

In the past, generals had been fired in disgrace for saying these words, now ▶

they were on Hitler's own lips. Desperately, Keitel and his men searched for something to raise the Führer's spirits. Then they spotted General Walther Wenck's 12th Army, standing west of Berlin to keep the Americans at bay on the Elbe.

There was no indication that the Americans would try to cross the river – so Wenck could turn round and come to Berlin's rescue! The idea roused Hitler from his torpor. A new plan began to take shape on the map table.

Last man standing must win the war

Hitler had long had a soft spot for the panzer officer Walther Wenck, who at just 44 had been appointed the youngest general in the army. He was charged with the role of Third Reich saviour.

"Soldiers of Wenck's Army!" Hitler began his order on 23rd April, which, despite the words, was not intended for Wenck's soldiers, but rather to boost morale in the encircled Berlin. "Your Führer has summoned you, and you have gone into the attack as in the days of conquest. Berlin is waiting for you!"

> **"Hitler leapt up and down and began to rant and rave. He turned alternately deathly pale and purple in the face, shaking in every limb."**
>
> Eyewitness to the Führer's meltdown.

Wenck hadn't yet moved a metre, because it took time to turn an entire army 180 degrees round without fuel. It wasn't until late the next day that the troops finally set off. Hitler's order was for Wenck to march towards Berlin, joining General Busse's 9th Army along the way. His plan predicted that when Steiner finally attacked from the north, the advancing Soviet forces would be crushed.

The soldiers of the 12th Army were willing to follow their general "Papi Wenck" into Hell and back again if he asked for it. And that was exactly what he had in mind: "Boys, you've got to go in once more," Wenck said to his men, but, he added: "It's not about Berlin any more, it's not about the Reich any more."

The general had his own secret plan: he knew the war was lost and his preference was to go into US captivity. Before that, however, Wenck wanted to open an escape route for General Busse, who found himself in a disastrous situation.

Busse had ignored Henrici's advice to withdraw the 9th Army. Instead, he had obediently formed a new line of defence south-east of Berlin. As a result, his 80,000 men were now surrounded in what had been dubbed the Halbe cauldron.

On 25th April, Busse received an order from Hitler to break through to Wenck's 12th Army and rescue the capital. A few days earlier, the manoeuvre might have succeeded; but now he had to fight his way – metre by metre – through strong Soviet forces. Busse decided that he was done obeying orders from Berlin. His only priority was to lead the 9th Army to the Elbe and the Americans.

His soldiers were strictly instructed not to waste any effort helping the hundreds of thousands of civilians who had sought protection from the army, sent fleeing by the stories of what the Russian soldiers did to the Germans.

"But, Herr Leutnant, the women", a soldier protested. "To leave them to the Reds, to be raped, killed?"

"We cannot help them."

Busse silenced his radio

All order broke down as the 9th Army began its breakout to the west. Military units such as divisions and regiments no longer existed, instead troops advanced in small groups that temporarily banded together to fight.

Panzer Sergeant Wolfgang Faust described a battle group preparing to push through a Soviet barricade in the dark. In addition to his own platoon of two Panther tanks, the group included a Tiger II and a couple of guns, while the infantry around them consisted of paratroopers, civilians from the Volkssturm, and a scattering of exhausted soldiers that had to be forced into battle: "They dragged out one unwilling soldier – a lad of eighteen or so – and executed him with a shot in the head. The others moved into the front line with grim faces."

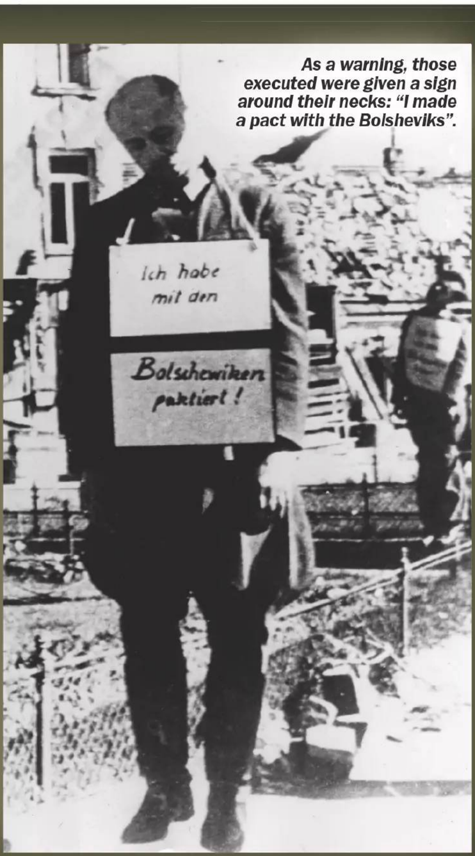
Under cover of darkness, the Germans were able to advance and overrun the Soviet barricade. Then the soldiers parted again.

SS issued death sentences in their thousands

In 1945, the increasingly desperate Adolf Hitler used every means to force German soldiers to fight. He had guards posted on all roads away from the front. They were to apprehend anyone who moved in the wrong direction without a valid reason.

"Military tribunals should take the strictest possible measures based on the principle that those who are afraid of an honest death in battle deserve the mean death of cowards", Hitler instructed. In March 1945, he introduced *Fliegende Standgericht* (Flying Courts Martial) with three officers as judges, a few clerks for the paperwork and a firing squad. Convicts had no possibility of appeal. As German forces collapsed in April, fanatical Nazis allowed themselves to execute anyone who lacked the right spirit to fight.

15,000 soldiers were executed for desertion, another 50,000 were sentenced to death for offences such as disobedience.



As a warning, those executed were given a sign around their necks: "I made a pact with the Bolsheviks".

ULLSTEIN BILD/RITZAU SCANPIX & SHUTTERSTOCK

Along with 100,000 German soldiers, almost half a million refugees also made it across the Elbe bridges at Tangermünde – most of them were driven back to Soviet-occupied territory due to an agreement between the Allies.

HUTTON DEUTSCH/GETTY IMAGES

As the 9th Army fought its way westwards, panicked commands poured in from Berlin. Busse no longer responded to radio messages, but army observation planes had revealed that his troops were moving due west – away from Berlin.

"The Führer in Berlin expects that the armies will do their duty," came an embittered message from the bunker in Berlin: "History and the German people will despise every man who in these circumstances does not give his utmost to save the situation and the Führer."

This order was also ignored by Busse. While Wenck attempted a mass evacuation south of the capital, General Heinrici's army was heading north towards the British forces. Hitler had no idea of this betrayal because Heinrici had begun sending falsified reports assuring him that he was still holding his ground.

"I refuse to carry out these suicidal orders any longer", Heinrici explained to those around him. "It is my responsibility on behalf of my troops to refuse these orders, and I intend to do so. It is also my responsibility to account for my actions to the German people."

The deception was discovered on 28th April, when a furious Chief of General Staff Keitel turned up at Heinrici's house. The general's staff feared for his life. During the meeting, they hid under some nearby trees armed with machine guns. If necessary, they would mow down Keitel's men.

Hitler committed suicide in Berlin

However, Keitel was content to dismiss Heinrici as a general and ordered him to appear in the Führerbunker the next day to explain himself to Hitler.

In the bunker, the Führer paced restlessly – he was waiting for the 12th Army: "Where is Wenck?" he asked.

The next day, Heinrici got into his car, but he didn't head for the capital. Heinrici wanted to get to Schleswig-Holstein while his troops surrendered to the British.

Hitler committed suicide on 30th April, but the war continued. The remnants of the 9th Army marched on until the advance units spotted familiar helmets and armoured vehicles ahead on 1st May.

"The next troops that we saw were German, and they called to us to keep moving, that the 12th Army was directly ahead," recalled panzer commander Wolfgang Faust.

How many soldiers Busse had left is unknown. Historians' guesses range from 5,000 to 25,000, who joined Wenck's 12th Army, and together they reached the banks of the Elbe. The crossing of the blown bridges began on 4th May, and according to Wenck's calculations, more than 100,000 soldiers and 400,000 civilians reached the other bank, where they surrendered to the Americans. SS general Steiner surrendered to the British.

The generals' mutiny had succeeded. In the final minutes of the war, they were able to move their soldiers out of Stalin's reach. But the revolt came far too late. Due to the German generals' ruthless discipline, millions of German soldiers had already died and the country had been bombed to ruins. ■

TOP NAZIS VIED OVER RUINED GERMANY

The Red Army had surrounded Berlin and Nazi Germany was disintegrating. But three senior figures around Hitler refused to recognise defeat. Göring, Himmler and Bormann had long been in the Führer's shadow – and now they all seized the opportunity to take control of the ruined country. In April 1945, a deadly game for power began.

The heir

Luftwaffe chief Göring was the Führer's official successor. He took it for granted that he would inherit the Nazi Reich after Hitler.

QUICK OVERVIEW

Berlin
Germany

Background: Nazi Germany was heading towards its final collapse in spring 1945 and Hitler intended to die in encircled Berlin.

Storyline: With the Führer's demise looming, the lust for power flared up among Germany's leaders. Senior Nazis forgot all about the destruction around them as they fought an internal battle to the death.

Consequences: The duellists got in each other's way, only to realise that Hitler had been playing them for fools. An unexpected successor was entrusted with the Nazi Reich in its final bitter days.

BY KASPER SCHLIE

Hitler always met with his military staff at 15.30 to be briefed on the situation at the fronts. This happened as usual on 22nd April 1945, when Soviet shells had been raining down on the Reich Chancellery for two days, sending tremors through the Führerbunker ten metres underground. The leader of Nazi Germany was well protected by thick concrete, but daily reports confirmed that the end was coming.

The day before, Hitler had ordered his 9th Army to attack and break the ring of Soviet forces around Berlin. But the Führer had lost all sense of reality. The broken German forces were no longer able to go on the offensive against

The faithful

Admiral Dönitz couldn't imagine Germany without Hitler. He was shocked when he suddenly found himself in the line of succession.

The schemer

As Hitler's secretary, Bormann had usurped power from other leading Nazis. He saw his chance to rise to the top.

The fanatic

SS leader Himmler believed he could form an alliance with the US and the British against Stalin. Therefore, he had to take over Germany.

ULLSTEIN BILD & GETTY IMAGES & ALAMY/IMAGESELECT

enemy armies that had more soldiers, more tanks and thousands of aircraft. Instead of advancing, the 9th Army retreated. Red in the face and with a trembling right hand, the crushed Hitler hurled resentful accusations.

"Everyone has deceived me! No one has told me the truth! The armed forces have lied to me!" he screamed at his generals in a prolonged fit of hysteria. Afterwards, he sat and looked ahead of him with a blank expression on his face, speaking softly as though he were alone:

"I shall not leave Berlin. I shall defend the city to the end. What do you mean, fight? There's not much fighting to be done." This was followed by words with far-reaching significance for Nazi Germany's top leaders:

"When it comes to negotiating, the Reichsmarschall [Göring] can do better than I." This was the first time Hitler had openly recognised defeat. The extent of the resignation was clear to Luftwaffe General Karl Koller and his SS colleague Hermann Fegelein. They were Hermann Göring and Heinrich Himmler's representatives in Berlin, and both officers rushed to report that the most powerful position in the Reich would soon be vacant.

Göring spied an opportunity

22ND APRIL, EVENING, OBERSALZBERG:

Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring had left Berlin and taken refuge in the Alps, which had not yet been taken by the enemy.

General Karl Koller's car drove up the steep mountain roads towards the alpine paradise of Obersalzberg, where Hitler and the most powerful Nazis had their summer ▶

residences. He had just arrived by plane from the capital and rushed up to report to his boss, Hermann Göring, whose luxury villa sat in a beautiful mountainside setting.

The Luftwaffe commander's eyes widened as he heard Koller describe the dramatic meeting that had taken place in the Führerbunker earlier that day. Hitler was apparently ready to hand over control of the Third Reich, and Göring had long had official status as the Führer's successor.

A lawyer who'd been called in confirmed that the rules were quite clear. A 1941 decree stated that if Hitler did not have freedom of movement and he could not communicate with his forces, Göring would assume all power. But in practice, any move was risky. Hitler's secretary Martin Bormann was still in the Führerbunker, and this master schemer used his close contact with Germany's leader to undermine the other senior Nazis.

"The man is just waiting for a chance to bring me down," said Göring. "If I act now, I may be stamped as a traitor; if I don't act, I'll be accused of having failed to do something in the hour of disaster."

Together with his advisors, Göring drafted a telegram asking Hitler to confirm his resignation. The message contained wording that would have serious consequences:

"If by 22.00 no answer is received, I will assume that you have been deprived of your freedom of action. I will then regard the conditions of your decree as fulfilled and will act for the good of the people and the Fatherland."

Unconditional loyalty was Joseph Goebbels's way into Hitler's inner circle.
GETTY IMAGES

Goebbels sacrificed everything for his reputation

While Himmler, Bormann and Göring fantasised about power after Hitler's death, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels was thinking about his place in the history books..

"[My] life ... will have no further value if I cannot spend it in the service of the Führer," wrote the Nazi spin doctor in a note dedicated to posterity. He knew all was lost and didn't want to look like a coward by trying to save himself.

The first step in the minister's staged exit was to have a doctor euthanise his and Magda Goebbels's six children in the Führerbunker. The couple then dressed up and went to the garden above. There, Goebbels pulled out a pistol and shot Magda before turning the muzzle on himself. SS guards tried to burn the corpses, but ran out of petrol. Instead, the Soviets found the remains when they took Berlin.

Bormann struck back

23RD APRIL, 00.56, FÜHRERBUNKER: ***Calm had descended on Hitler's headquarters as everyone tried to forget the Führer's hysteria from the night before.***

A telegram arrived via the navy's network – it was the only thing still working in bombed-out Berlin. Martin Bormann read the contents and immediately saw his chance.

With dismay in his voice, he declared it an "ultimatum", as he handed the telegram to his boss shortly after. As Hitler read it, Bormann reminded him that Göring had been suspected of conducting secret negotiations with the Allies just six months earlier. Initially, however, Hitler reacted with indifference and simply dictated a short reply to the Luftwaffe chief.

"The decree of 29th June 1941 only comes into effect on my specific agreement. There can be no talk of lack of freedom to act. I forbid you to take any steps in the direction you have indicated," it coolly read.

Bormann was annoyed, but that afternoon he saw a new opportunity when another telegram from Göring was intercepted. It was an instruction to Foreign Minister Ribbentrop to come to Obersalzberg at midnight if Hitler had not shown signs of life by then. Curious eyes followed Bormann as he stormed through the Führerbunker, heading for Hitler's living room.

"Göring is engaged in treason!" Bormann proclaimed indignantly. "He's already sending telegrams to members of the government and announcing that on the basis of his powers he will assume your office at midnight, my Führer!"

Finally, Hitler reacted. He had been calm since his outburst the day before, but now, as so often in the past year, his frayed nerves were running wild: "I've known that for a long time," Hitler raged, his face red. "I know Göring is lazy. He let the Luftwaffe go to rack and ruin. He was corrupt. It was his example that made corruption possible in our state. And on top of it all he's been addicted to morphine for years. I've known it all along."

Bormann was told to send a telegram to Obersalzberg, where Göring was immediately stripped of all posts. The Luftwaffe chief was also told that he would be arrested and could only save his life if he publicly announced that he was resigning for health reasons.

Half an hour later, a response arrived from Obersalzberg: Hermann Göring had suddenly suffered heart problems and had to step down from his duties. Bormann had outdone himself and removed the official successor to the throne of Nazi Germany in a matter of hours. The line of succession was completely open.

Luftwaffe chief visited by SS

23RD APRIL, 20.50, OBERSALZBERG: ***Göring had spent an anxious day waiting for the inevitable punishment for his telegrams.***

The SS battalion on Obersalzberg was tasked with protecting Hitler and the other Nazi elite when at the alpine retreat. Therefore, the telegram, which contained a sharp order from the Führerbunker, came as a surprise:

"Surround Göring house immediately and, overcoming any resistance, immediately arrest the former Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring," the message from

Berlin read. Shortly after, another message arrived – this time with Bormann as the sender.

If the Führer's orders weren't obeyed, the SS men were warned that they would "answer for this with your lives".

As darkness fell, SS soldiers surrounded Göring's spacious alpine villa. When the Luftwaffe chief hadn't emerged an hour later, the troops stormed into the building with guns drawn. An SS officer stepped up to the hitherto mighty Nazi leader and said:

"Herr Reichsmarschall, you are under arrest." Göring was placed under house arrest along with his staff and told he was not allowed to communicate with the outside world – not even his wife. General Karl Koller, the messenger from the Führerbunker, tried to reason with the guards:

"Do you realise that this is madness? The Reichsmarschall has acted quite correctly. He merely put a question to the Führer." The arresting SS officer was uncomfortable with the situation and replied that he was simply keeping Göring in *"Ehrenhaft"*, honourable detention.

Two days later, prisoners and guards briefly forgot all about the intrigue of the Nazi elite; 350 British bombers appeared in the sky above Obersalzberg and, as the Germans took shelter in underground bunkers, large parts of the retreat were left in ruins – including Göring's villa.

Himmler thought big

23RD APRIL, 23.30, LÜBECK: ***Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler had left Berlin and was planning a glorious future for himself.***

SS chief Himmler sat down in the basement of the Swedish consulate. In front of him was Folke Bernadotte of the Swedish Red Cross, who believed they were negotiating the release of Scandinavians from German concentration camps. But Hitler's breakdown in the Führerbunker and Göring's fall had given the SS leader the courage to reveal his audacious plan.

"It is very probable that Hitler is already dead and, if not, he very probably will be within the next few days," said Himmler as another Allied bombardment sent tremors through the building.

"The war must stop and Germany must admit she is beaten. But I have not been able to see how I could break my oath to the Führer. Now the situation is different. I recognise that Germany is defeated," he said. Bernadotte listened in surprise as Himmler continued:

"In the new situation I consider my hands free. I am determined to spare as much territory as possible from the Soviet invasion. I am prepared to capitulate on the Western Front. The armies of the Western powers will thereby be enabled to advance rapidly as far as possible to the east." Himmler envisioned Germany joining Britain and the US in a showdown with the Soviet Union. ▶

Suicide became de rigueur in Germany

Hard-boiled Nazi criminals and ordinary Germans killed themselves as they feared enemy reprisals.

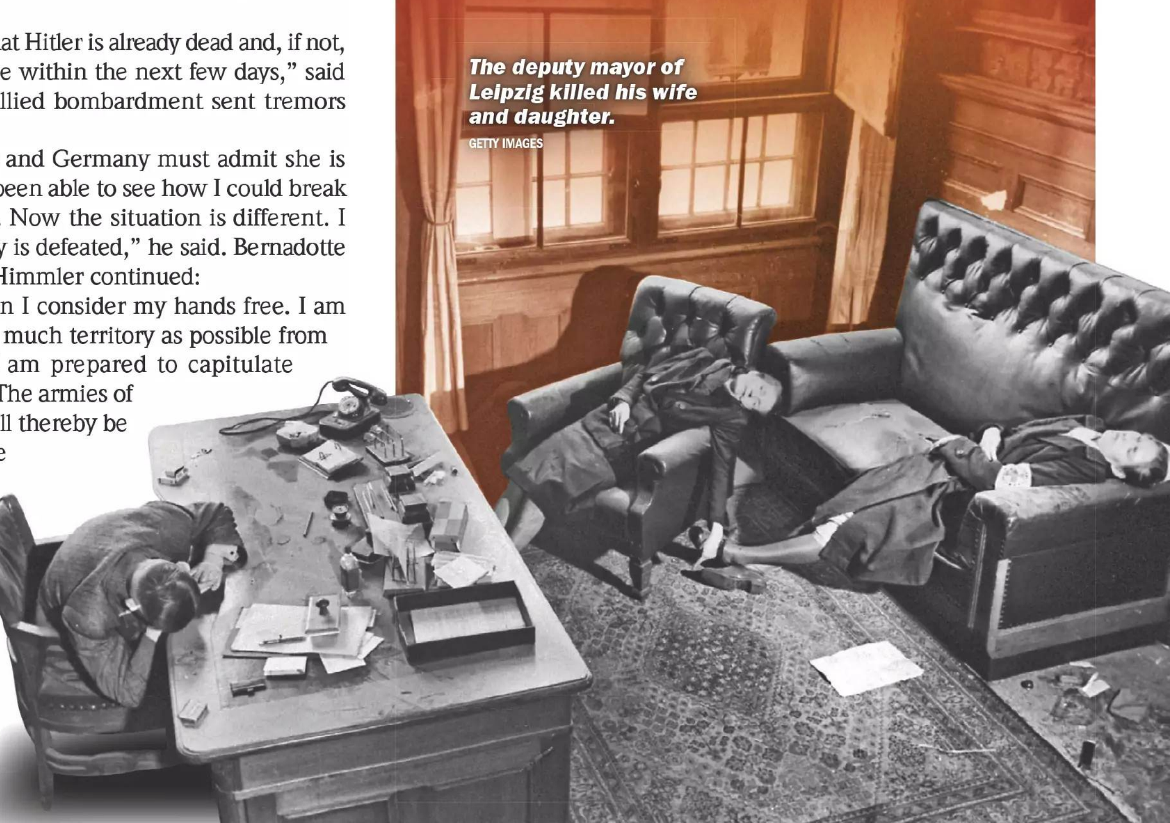
A macabre craze spread in Hitler's Germany as Allied armies pushed across the borders. In March 1945, the Nazi security service SD reported a high suicide rate: "Many are getting used to the idea of putting an end to it. The demand for poison, a pistol and other means of ending life is great everywhere."

The Nazis' propaganda about the Soviets was so terrifying that almost 4,000 Berliners killed themselves in April and May 1945 alone. Mass suicides took place all over eastern Germany, with entire families often choosing to commit suicide together. The death drive was particularly high among the Reich's senior Nazis and military leaders. War criminals knew they would be punished for their deeds and preferred to cheat the executioner. Others were simply too honourable to surrender and admit defeat.

"I don't think I can stand the circus that is about to begin," said Admiral Friedeburg, the fleet commander. Shortly afterwards, he bit into a glass ampoule of deadly potassium cyanide. The suicide rate was particularly high in the navy, where there were few convinced Nazis, but many strong-willed officers with old-fashioned notions of honour.

NAZI ELITE WAS DECIMATED

Gestapo chiefs:	7 out of 47	15%
Nazi Party leaders:	8 out of 41	20%
Generals in Luftwaffe:	14 out of 98	14%
Generals in the army	53 out of 554	10%
Admirals:	11 out of 53	21%



The deputy mayor of Leipzig killed his wife and daughter.

GETTY IMAGES

Bernadotte agreed to pass on the offer to the Allies in exchange for the SS chief promising to end the German occupation of Denmark and Norway. In addition, around 20,000 Scandinavian concentration camp prisoners would be evacuated to Sweden.

As Bernadotte drove towards the local airfield shortly afterwards, he spoke to an assistant about Himmler's ambitious plan: "The Reichsführer is no longer in touch with reality. I can help him no more."

Faithful Heinrich was revealed

28TH APRIL, EVENING, FÜHRERBUNKER: ***The Soviets had captured Berlin's airports, cutting off the last escape route out of the capital.***

It had already been a dark day in the Führerbunker, with reports of defeat and collapse pouring in from all fronts. But in the final hours, Hitler received a message that shook him more than anything else.

A nervous official from the press office had arrived to report on a news item from Radio Atlantic. The station pretended to be run by German resistance fighters, but actually broadcast from the UK. According to the announcer, Heinrich Himmler had secretly tried to negotiate peace with Britain and the US, and the two countries had immediately rejected his suggestion. The propaganda broadcaster claimed that the senior Nazi intended to wrest power from Hitler.

With quivering lips and a chalk-white complexion, Hitler listened to the trembling man in front of him. Of all the recent betrayals, this was the worst. He had never imagined that *"der treue Heinrich"* – faithful Heinrich – would stab him in the back.

A judgement was made on the spot: Himmler was removed from government and had to be arrested as soon as possible. Meanwhile, Hitler had to take his bloodlust out on someone else and targeted Hermann Fegelein, the SS leader's representative. The officer was tracked down, taken to the Reich Chancellery's garden and shot in the head.

Behind a serious expression, Martin Bormann could rejoice that another rival had put himself out of the game. However, he did not confide this in his diary. Instead, he wrote of how Hitler repeatedly said how tired he was of living when he had so many traitors around him. The final act in the bunker was fast approaching.

Göring's life of luxury continued during his first days as a prisoner. Then he was put behind bars.

GETTY IMAGES

Hitler dictated the future

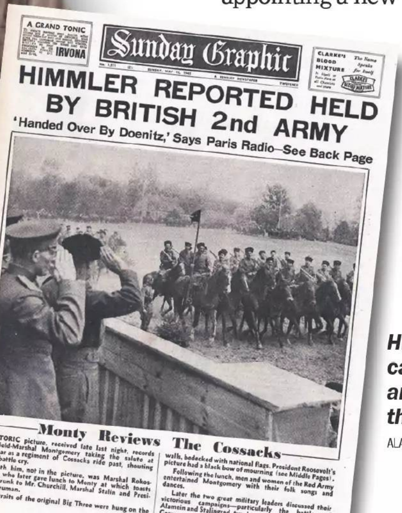
29TH APRIL, 03.00, FÜHRERBUNKER: ***The battles in Berlin's streets now raged close to Hitler's hideout, where nervousness was spreading.***

Adolf Hitler knew that time was running out. With Propaganda Minister Goebbels and Martin Bormann as witnesses, he dictated his political testament to a secretary, who had to labour at the typewriter to keep up.

"Since our forces are too small to withstand any longer the enemy's attack on this place, and since our own resistance will be gradually worn down by an army of blind automata, I wish to share the fate that millions of others have accepted and to remain here in the city," Hitler said by way of justification before continuing: "Göring and Himmler, by their secret negotiations with the enemy, without my knowledge or approval, and by their illegal attempts to seize power in the state, quite apart from their treachery to my person, have brought irreparable shame on the country and the whole people."

Bormann listened, hiding his delight behind a serious expression – only to be shaken by Hitler's next words:

"In order that the German people may have a government of honourable men who will continue the war by all methods I appoint the following members of the new Cabinet as leaders of the nation: President of the Reich and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz; Chancellor of the Reich: Dr Joseph Goebbels; Party Minister: Martin Bormann..." Instead of appointing a new overall leader, Hitler intended to divide power. And the naval commander Karl Dönitz, whom no one had previously recognised as a potential player in the power games,



A GRAND TONIC
IRVONA
CLARKE'S BLOOD MIXTURE
The Name Speaks for Itself

Sunday Graphic

HIMMLER REPORTED HELD BY BRITISH 2nd ARMY

'Handed Over By Doenitz,' Says Paris Radio—See Back Page

Monty Reviews The Cossacks

HISTORIC picture, received late last night, records Field-Marshal Montgomery taking the salute at Wismar as a regiment of Cossacks ride past, shouting their battle cry.

With him, not in the picture, was Marshal Rokossovsky who later gave lunch to Monty at which toasts were drunk to Mr. Churchill, Marshal Stalin and President Truman.

Portraits of the original Big Three were hung on the walls, bedecked with national flags. President Roosevelt's picture had a black bow of mourning (see Middle Pages).

Following the lunch, men and women of the Red Army entertained Montgomery with their folk songs and dances.

Later the two great military leaders discussed their victorious campaigns—particularly the battle Alamein and Stalingrad

Himmler was taken into captivity disguised as an ordinary soldier, but the Brits exposed him.

ALAMY/IMAGESELECT

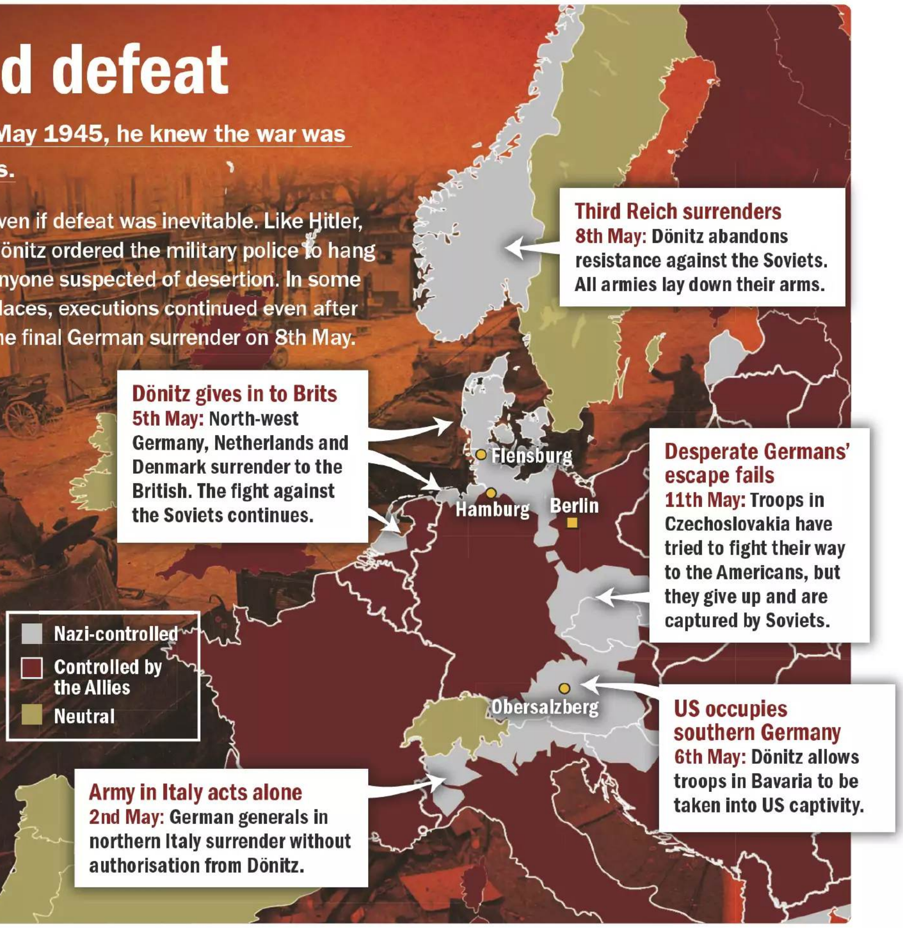
Dönitz postponed defeat

When Admiral Dönitz took power on 1st May 1945, he knew the war was lost. Yet he fought on to delay the Soviets.

Germany's major industrial facilities in the Ruhr district had been destroyed and its enemies had taken cities such as Berlin, Cologne and Munich. The Reich consisted only of enclaves defended by hopelessly outnumbered forces.

Nevertheless, Admiral Dönitz ordered the fight to continue. He took command from Hitler on 1st May and he intended to "save Germany from destruction by the advancing Bolshevist enemy", as he later wrote. Soviet troops were already taking cruel revenge for the Nazis' brutal behaviour during the fighting in the Soviet Union.

The admiral's strategy was a surrender in stages. On the Western Front, German forces were to surrender so that US, British and French armies could occupy as much territory as possible. Meanwhile, troops on the Eastern Front were ordered to delay the Soviet advance as much as possible. No one was allowed to give up, even if defeat was inevitable. Like Hitler, Dönitz ordered the military police to hang anyone suspected of desertion. In some places, executions continued even after the final German surrender on 8th May.



Third Reich surrenders
8th May: Dönitz abandons resistance against the Soviets. All armies lay down their arms.

Dönitz gives in to Brits
5th May: North-west Germany, Netherlands and Denmark surrender to the British. The fight against the Soviets continues.

Desperate Germans' escape fails
11th May: Troops in Czechoslovakia have tried to fight their way to the Americans, but they give up and are captured by Soviets.

US occupies southern Germany
6th May: Dönitz allows troops in Bavaria to be taken into US captivity.

Army in Italy acts alone
2nd May: German generals in northern Italy surrender without authorisation from Dönitz.

would be the strongest because he would control the military.

Bankrupt estate changed owner

30TH APRIL, 18.35, PLÖN: *Grand Admiral Dönitz retreated north from Hamburg to keep his distance from the advancing British.*

Karl Dönitz was sitting in his temporary headquarters when his adjutant handed him a telegram from Bormann in Berlin. It informed him of an unwelcome promotion:

"The Führer appoints you, Herr Grand Admiral, as his successor. Written authority is on its way. You will immediately take all such measures as the situation requires." The telegram concealed the fact that Hitler had committed suicide three hours earlier. Bormann wanted time to negotiate with the Soviets in Berlin so he could escape the city and remain part of the power game. Meanwhile, Dönitz pondered what to do next.

"An end to it, we have fought enough heroic struggles, save the people, no more unnecessary bloody sacrifices," he told his adjutant. "As head of state, there is nothing left for me to do but end the war as quickly as possible." But not yet. First, he wanted to save as many Germans as possible from falling into the hands of the Soviet invasion forces.

When Dönitz answered the telegram, he kept quiet about his plans. He had learnt from the fate of Göring and Himmler. "I shall continue this war to an end worthy of the unique, heroic struggle of the German people," Dönitz piously promised.

Himmler joined the ranks

30TH APRIL, MIDNIGHT, PLÖN: *Himmler was still at large and hadn't given up on his dreams.*

A motorcade of open-top cars stopped in front of Dönitz's headquarters and Heinrich Himmler climbed out. Surrounded by six heavily armed SS bodyguards, he strode towards the entrance, keenly looking around him. Despite the darkness, the new arrivals could make out figures with rifles and machine guns hiding behind trees. Dönitz clearly recognised the SS chief as a potential threat.

However, the admiral was the epitome of courtesy when he welcomed Himmler into his office and handed over the telegram confirming Dönitz's appointment as head of state. Himmler read the news in amazement. When he stood up a moment later, his face white, the admiral was ready to reach for the cocked pistol hidden under papers on the desk. But Himmler simply bowed.

"Allow me to become the second man in your state," said the SS chief with forced reverence. Dönitz replied without hesitation that he could not give the high-profile Nazi a role in his new government. Himmler would be a liability when negotiations with the Allies ▶

Bormann's fate was a mystery for 50 years

Hitler's secretary disappeared without a trace in Berlin. For decades, he was the most wanted Nazi criminal.

When Adolf Hitler committed suicide in Berlin, his secretary Martin Bormann decided to flee. He was last seen making his way through the ruins of the devastated capital.

1945: The leader of the Hitler Youth claims he saw Bormann's body at a bridge near Lehrter railway station, Berlin, on 2nd May.

1946: The Allies sentence Bormann to death in absentia. He is rumoured to have been seen in Argentina, Spain and Denmark.

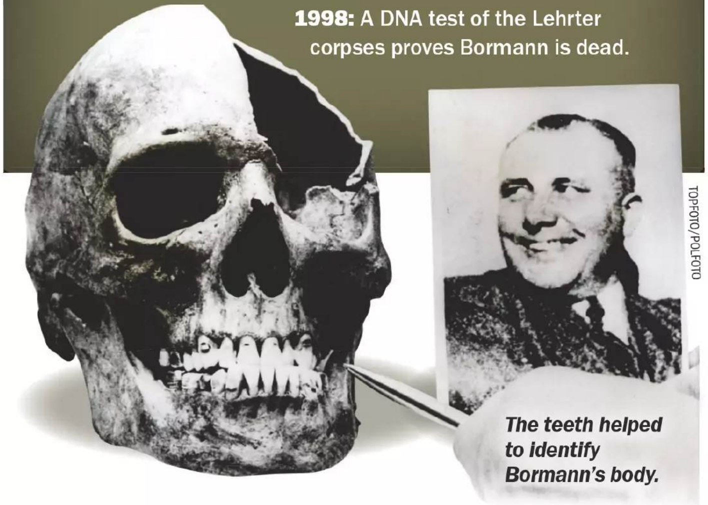
1963: A German witness says he buried two bodies at Lehrter station on 8th May 1945. One bore a payslip bearing the name Dr Stumpfegger, who had escaped with Bormann.

1964: The West German government offers a reward of 100,000 Deutschmarks for information leading to the arrest of Bormann.

1972: Construction workers find two bodies at Lehrter station. Autopsies show that they had used poison to commit suicide.

1973: Analysis of teeth and skull shape and traces of a fractured clavicle indicate that one of the two dead men is Bormann.

1998: A DNA test of the Lehrter corpses proves Bormann is dead.



The teeth helped to identify Bormann's body.

TOPFOTO/POLFOTO

began. Disappointed, the guest bade Dönitz farewell, insisting that Germany would need him and his SS to avert chaos. He left Plön, convinced that good fortune would come his way; the world would realise that he was indispensable if Soviet communism was to be stopped.

Bormann fled

1ST MAY, 07.40, FÜHRERBUNKER: ***German attempts to negotiate with the Soviets had failed. The enemy demanded unconditional surrender.***

Martin Bormann realised he couldn't talk his way out of the besieged capital. But he refused to give up now that Göring and Himmler were gone. Instead, Bormann sent a final message to Dönitz:

"The will has become effective. I shall come to see you at the earliest possible moment. In my opinion, publication should be postponed until we meet." He then confided his desperate plan to his diary: "Escape attempt!"

With other residents of the Führerbunker, Bormann would sneak through the Soviet ring around Berlin, then he'd seek out Dönitz. He sewed Hitler's will into his uniform, left the Reich Chancellery in the company of a few other Nazi refugees, and ran to Wilhelmplatz. There, the group left the burning streets to sneak into the tunnels of the underground. Silently, they disappeared into the darkness.

Dönitz spoke to the German people

1ST MAY, 10.20, HAMBURG: ***Germany's new leader feared that Bormann would attempt a coup d'état. He decided to make his new post official.***

Karl Dönitz sat in the radio studio in Hamburg with an almost impossible task ahead of him. He had to persuade a devastated nation that had sworn allegiance to Adolf Hitler for 12 years to trust a sailor from Grünau instead. The red light in the studio came on to signal him to begin.

"German men and women, soldiers of the armed forces!" Dönitz said into the microphone. "Our Führer, Adolf Hitler, has fallen. In the deepest sorrow and respect the German people bow." The formalities over, he could continue.

"The Führer has appointed me to be his successor. It is my first task to save Germany from destruction by the advancing Bolshevist enemy. For all this I need your help. Give me your confidence because your road is mine as well."

Two days later, Dönitz appointed his new government in Flensburg – a remote provincial town and naval base as far away as possible from the rapidly advancing British.

SS leader's dreams were shattered

5TH MAY, SCHLESWIG: ***Bormann had disappeared, and Dönitz had prevented resistance from the SS by holding daily meetings with Himmler.***

Himmler stayed near the new government city of Flensburg. He was sure that if Dönitz could get him half an hour with Eisenhower, he could forge an alliance against the Soviets.

The senior Nazi was in a great mood when he received a visit from Germany's new foreign minister, Lutz Schwerin von Krosigk. But his ebullience evaporated when the guest explained that if any Brit or American even considered negotiating with Himmler, the public would be up in arms. Himmler's name was associated with the SS, war crimes and concentration camps.

Dönitz had just surrendered the Netherlands, north-west Germany and Denmark to the British. With the war winding down, the new government had to get rid of Himmler as quickly as possible so that Dönitz and his ministers could distance themselves from the crimes of Nazism. Instead of being given a post, the leading Nazi was told to leave. Himmler's last hope, that he would be hailed as the saviour of the West, protecting it from communism, was shattered.

Instead, he had to flee on foot, wearing an eye patch and carrying a fake ID card bearing the name Heinrich Hitzinger.

Göring partied with Americans

8TH MAY, TYROL: ***After the British bombardment of Obersalzberg, Göring had persuaded his guards to follow him to his castle, Mauterndorf, in Austria.***

On 1st May, the SS men guarding Göring received a telegram from Bormann in Berlin. They were to execute their prisoner. But after the news of Hitler's death, the soldiers were unsure about who they should be taking orders from. Göring added to the confusion by serving expensive wine from the cellar, making his house arrest seem like a holiday.

The anxiety of the first days had subsided so much that he sent a telegram to Eisenhower offering to negotiate peace "marshal to marshal". Göring envisioned himself and the American making plans for the future at a castle that his assistant Karl Koller had commandeered for the purpose.

On 6th May, with the Germans having surrendered on several fronts, the SS guards left Göring. Two days later, he surrendered to the Americans wearing a blue uniform with gold trim. The German's sense of his own importance was fuelled by his new hosts, who put him up in a hotel where he drank champagne and held court with US officers.

Two weeks later, the fun came to an end. Göring was relieved of his gold rings, his dress uniform and a stash of morphine, and was put under strict guard as a war criminal.

Himmler's life on the road ended

23RD MAY, LÜNEBURG: ***The war had been over since 8th May, but Himmler was still at large, accompanied only by two loyal men.***

A British patrol arrested three German soldiers trudging along a country road. When they complained about having to wait to be questioned, an intelligence officer realised they were high-ranking men. At the first question, the smallest of them shed his disguise. He removed his eye patch, donned a pair of glasses and said: "I am Heinrich Himmler."

Stunned, the British realised they had caught one of the world's most wanted men. A quick body search revealed two vials of poison, which were confiscated before Himmler was sent for further interrogation. There, a doctor asked the former SS leader to open his mouth and saw a piece of blue glass. When he went to remove the fragment, the prisoner broke free, having ingested a third vial of potassium cyanide. All attempts at resuscitation were unsuccessful and Heinrich Himmler was pronounced dead.

The last day of the Third Reich

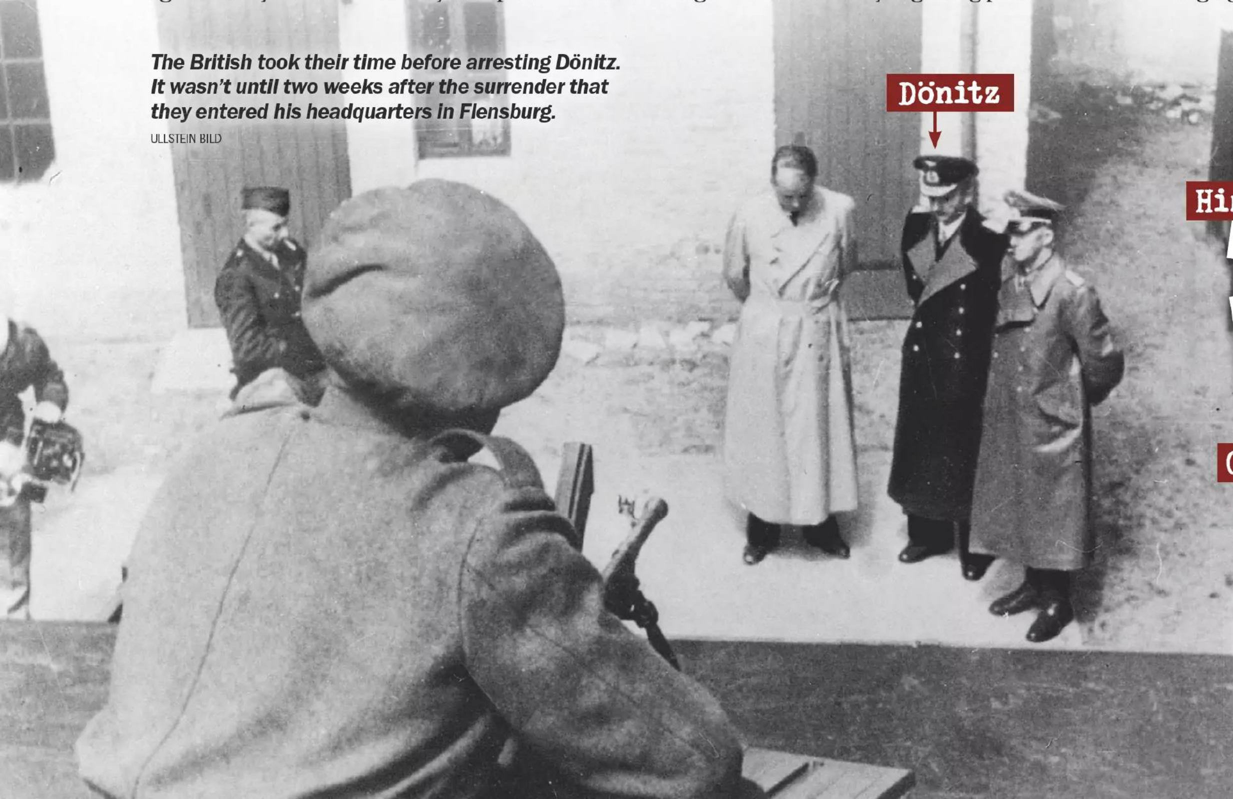
23RD MAY, FLENSBURG: ***To Dönitz's surprise, the British had ignored him since the surrender.***

When the Allies ordered Dönitz to report to the ship *Patria* in Flensburg harbour, he knew it was finally over.

"Pack your bags," the admiral told his adjutant. Aboard the ship, several Allied officers were waiting. A US general took the floor. He formally announced that Dönitz and his entourage could consider themselves prisoners of war.

"The acting German government is hereby dissolved," the American concluded. The Germans were marched away with their hands above their heads, then subjected to a body search to ensure they were not concealing vials of poison. The former foreign minister von Krosigk protested.

"Keep smiling," was the advice from an officer behind him in the line. In autumn 1945, the most powerful of Hitler's henchmen were taken to Nuremberg for an Allied tribunal. Dönitz and von Krosigk were sentenced to ten years in prison for war crimes. Bormann was sentenced to death in absentia – no one knew he had died in Berlin. And Göring received the same sentence, but cheated the executioner by ingesting poison before his hanging.



The British took their time before arresting Dönitz. It wasn't until two weeks after the surrender that they entered his headquarters in Flensburg.

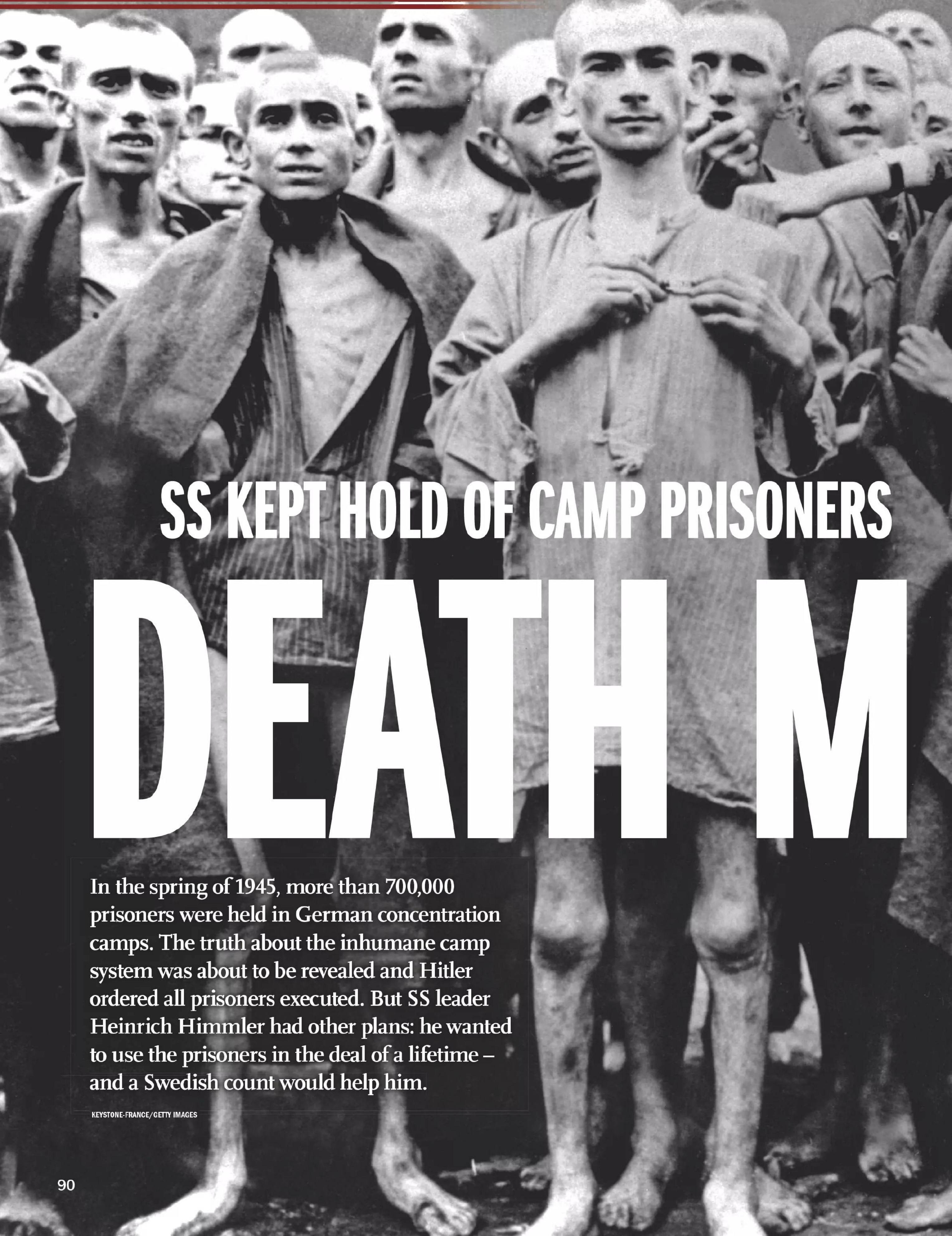
ULLSTEIN BILD

Himmler
Göring

ULLSTEIN/POLFOTO

AP/POLFOTO

Himmler and Göring's dreams of power after the war were shattered and they both committed suicide.

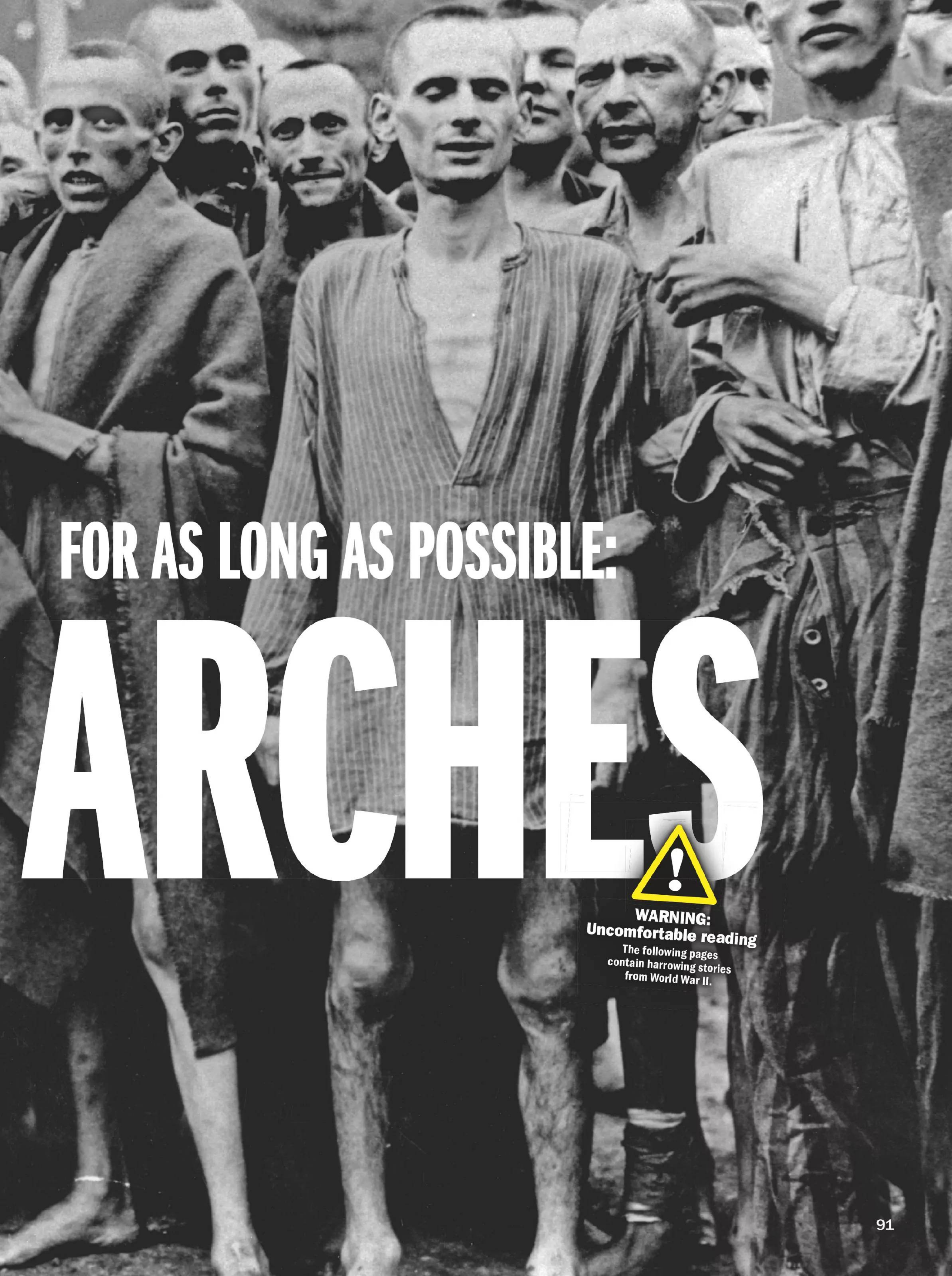


SS KEPT HOLD OF CAMP PRISONERS

DEATH M

In the spring of 1945, more than 700,000 prisoners were held in German concentration camps. The truth about the inhumane camp system was about to be revealed and Hitler ordered all prisoners executed. But SS leader Heinrich Himmler had other plans: he wanted to use the prisoners in the deal of a lifetime – and a Swedish count would help him.

KEYSTONE-FRANCE/GETTY IMAGES



FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE:

ARCHES

WARNING:
Uncomfortable reading

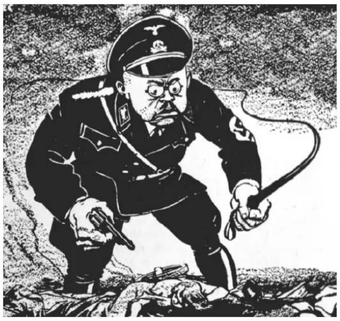
The following pages contain harrowing stories from World War II.

BY POUL SIERSBÆK & TORSTEN WEPER

Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler was ill. A nasty combination of overexertion and flu had triggered a mild heart attack and now the SS leader was hospitalised in the Hohenlychen Sanatorium north of Berlin. As a precaution, the roofs had been painted white and decorated with large red crosses – so that Allied bombers wouldn't target them during their raids in February 1945.

For the first time since joining the Nazi party 22 years earlier, Himmler had begun to doubt Adolf Hitler. In his most honest moments, Himmler discussed with confidants in the SS whether they should depose the Führer in a coup. The subject kept coming up, but when it was next raised, Himmler assured them of his unbreakable loyalty to Hitler.

However, the SS leader had realised that Germany was losing the war. In the military hospital, he hatched an idea to use the country's 700,000 concentration camp prisoners in a crucial deal with the US and Britain: if he released the prisoners, the fighting on the Western Front would cease. And then the Germans could ally with the Western powers and take on the Soviet Union.


Heinrich Himmler was SS commander and in charge of concentration camps.

WORLD HISTORY ARCHIVE/IMAGESELECT

Important Swedish guest

19th February 1945, Hohenlychen: The Swedish Red Cross tried to get permission to rescue all Norwegian and Danish concentration camp prisoners. Count Folke Bernadotte was sent to Germany to negotiate.

Himmler was still at the Hohenlychen military hospital when a strong-willed count turned up. The lean Swede with a steady gaze tried to convince the SS leader that all the Scandinavian prisoners in the concentration camps should be evacuated to Sweden. In return, Bernadotte promised, the Germans' reputation would be improved.

Himmler found the proposal absurd, but he didn't dare reject the Swede outright because Folke Bernadotte was vice president of the Swedish Red Cross and had good contacts with Swedish politicians. Only with their help could his future peace proposal reach the Allies.

After several hours of discussion, it was agreed that Bernadotte could evacuate the Scandinavians from the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg – but the Swedes had to provide their own transport and supply their own petrol, Himmler insisted.

Bernadotte flew back to Sweden to deal with the practical issues. He needed to gather 100 buses, lorries and ambulances and find 300 volunteers to carry out the evacuation. It was crucial he acted quickly, because no one knew how long the SS leader's goodwill would last.

Prisoners built U-boat shipyard

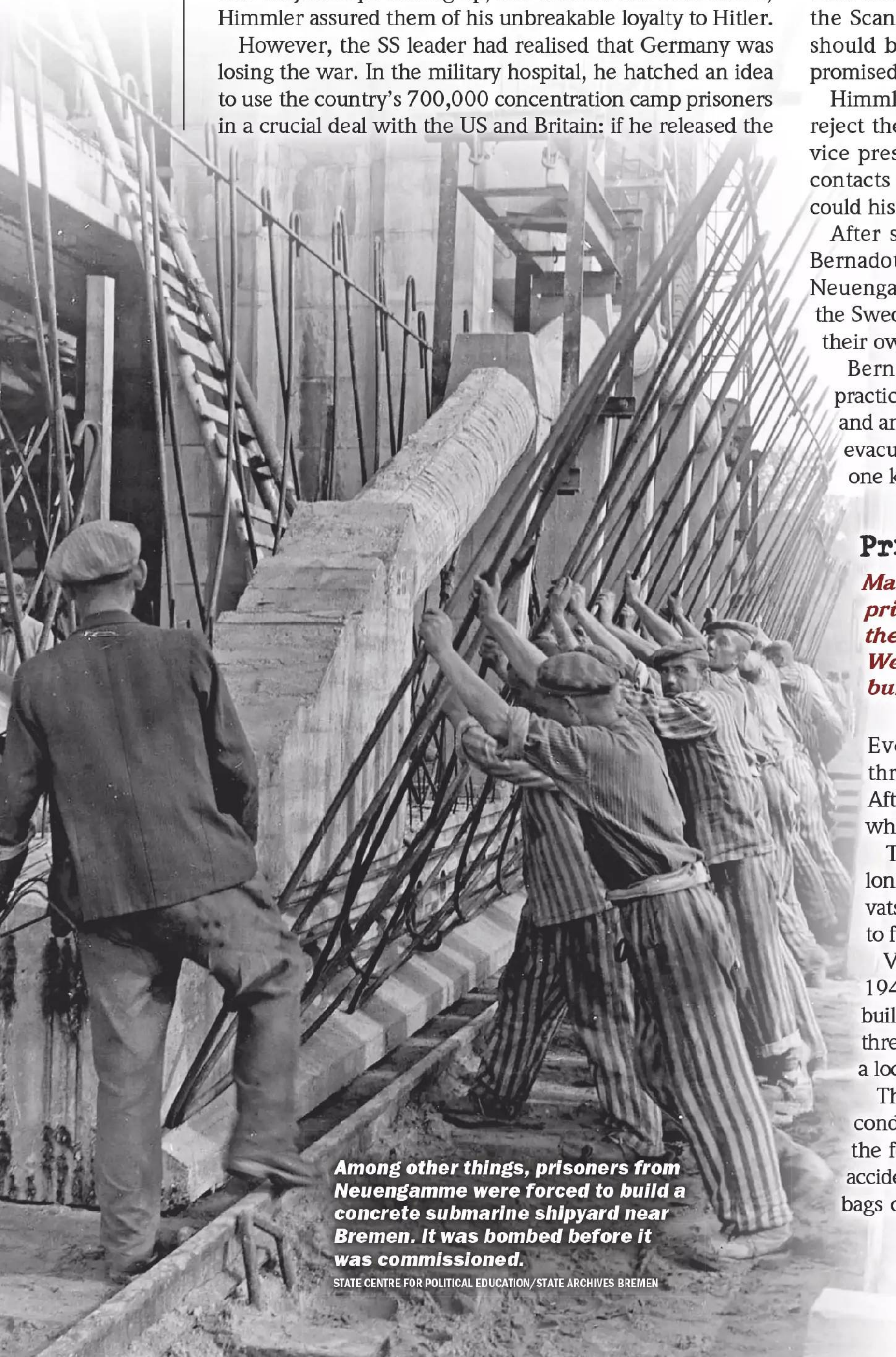
March, Valentin bunker near Bremen: All prisoners in the German camp system were the property of the SS. On the banks of the Weser River, they were building a gigantic bunker that concealed a shipyard.

Every morning, 3,000 prisoners marched out through the gate of the Farge concentration camp. After five kilometres, they reached the Weser River, where a giant concrete bunker rose up.

The bunker, code-named Valentin, was 416 metres long and rose 26 metres into the landscape. In large vats, prisoners mixed 500,000 m³ of concrete by hand to form the 4.5-metre-thick bunker walls.

Valentin was scheduled for completion in August 1945, when it would function as an efficient shipyard, building submarines on an assembly line. Every week, three new vessels would be released into the river via a lock, and from there they would sail straight to war.

The prisoners' working day was 12 hours long, the conditions at the construction site were terrible, and the food was inadequate. Every day, prisoners died in accidents or from sheer exhaustion while carrying heavy bags of cement that weighed more than the prisoners


Among other things, prisoners from Neuengamme were forced to build a concrete submarine shipyard near Bremen. It was bombed before it was commissioned.

STATE CENTRE FOR POLITICAL EDUCATION/STATE ARCHIVES BREMEN themselves. Naturally, the British had their eyes on the gigantic concrete structure taking shape by the river; one day in March, Lancaster bombers flew over the construction site and dropped 12 Grand Slam bombs, each containing ten tonnes of explosives. The explosions punched a hole in the roof, sent a digger to the bottom of the river, and destroyed the large concrete mixing tanks. But the SS forced the concentration camp prisoners to continue working.

New orders from SS leader

12th March, Hohenlychen: Himmler's Finnish physical therapist persuaded the SS leader to make an unexpected humanitarian gesture.

For years, Himmler had been plagued by painful stomach cramps that only his personal physical therapist, Felix Kersten, could cure. During recent treatments, Kersten had managed to extract a promise from Himmler that the concentration camps would be handed over to the Allies without a fight. The gruelling death marches, where starving and exhausted prisoners trudged from camp to camp, had to stop, the SS leader decided. A few days later, he also ordered an end to the killing of Jews in the camps.

Few SS men followed Himmler's surprising order – and it was reversed when Hitler demanded the destruction of all concentration camps and the killing of all prisoners. Himmler explained to his men that the Führer's decision was right: "[Germany's] enemies and the criminals in concentration camps shall not have the satisfaction of emerging from our ruin as triumphant conquerors. They shall share in the downfall. Those are the Führer's direct orders and I must see to it that they are carried out down to the last detail," he enthused.

But Hitler's order for total extermination was not realised either. Instead, the SS continued its chaotic race against time – all camps in danger of being captured by the enemy had to be evacuated by railway wagons or in large marching columns. Subsequently, the emptied camps had to be cleansed of all evidence of mass murder and maltreatment.

Debate with Himmler

2nd April, Hohenlychen: Himmler and Bernadotte met for the second time in the military hospital. Bernadotte still hoped to be allowed to take the concentration camp prisoners to Sweden.

"I am ready to do anything for the German nation," Himmler stated, "but the war must go on. I have given my oath to the Führer, and that oath is a binding one."

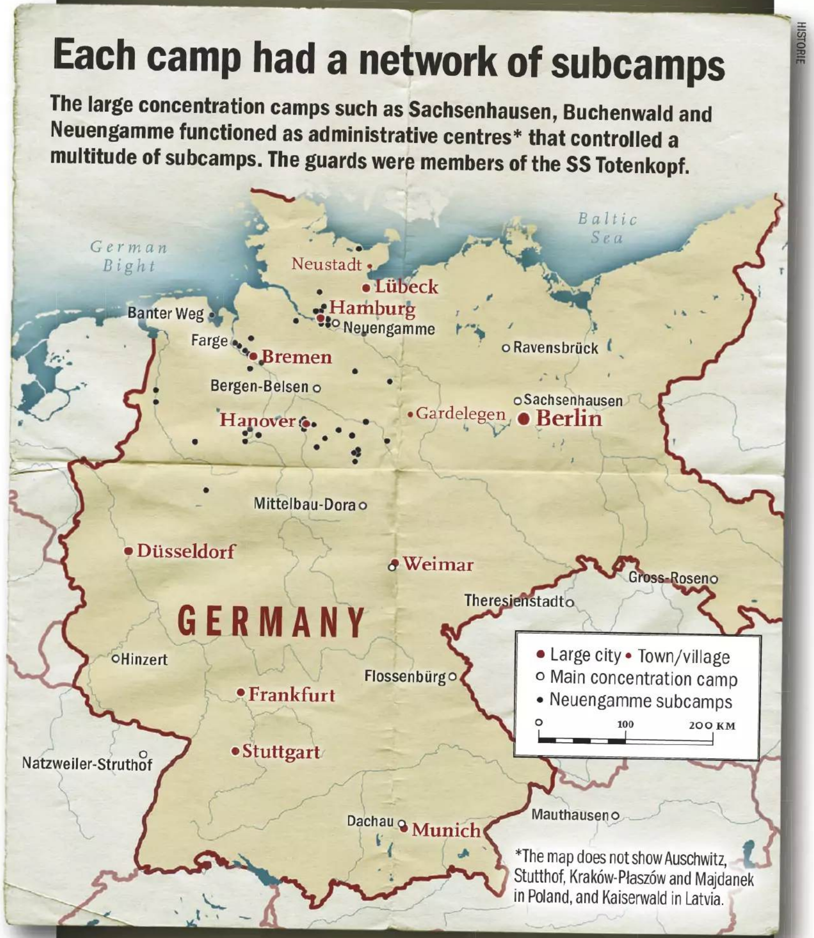
Bernadotte presented his view: "Don't you realise that Germany has lost the war? By attacking Russia in 1941 you yourselves made it a war on two fronts, and it was that which snatched victory from your grasp. You yourself say that you are willing to do anything for the German nation … you ought to put the welfare of your people above your loyalty to Hitler."

The discussion ended inconclusively after four hours.

Valentin workers sent on death march

6th April, Farge concentration camp: The British were advancing in northern Germany and the

►



Each camp had a network of subcamps

The large concentration camps such as Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald and Neuengamme functioned as administrative centres* that controlled a multitude of subcamps. The guards were members of the SS Totenkopf.

*The map does not show Auschwitz, Stutthof, Kraków-Płaszów and Majdanek in Poland, and Kaiserwald in Latvia.

HISTORIE

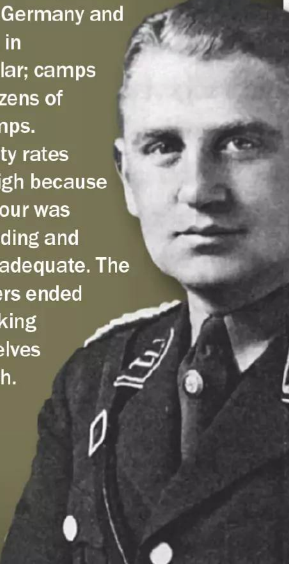
SS hired out prisoners as slaves

Since the Nazis took power in 1933, the SS built a network of camps for Jews, communists, homosexuals and others. The SS hired out this forced labour to German companies.

Few people have heard of the Farge concentration camp, which was located on a military site west of Bremen. There, 3,000 prisoners lived in squalid conditions in a disused underground oil depot.

Their task was to build the Valentin bunker, which 50 German companies had signed a contract with the Kriegsmarine to build. To complete construction as cheaply as possible, the firms hired camp prisoners from the SS. Each prisoner cost four Reichsmark a day – a third of what a German labourer would have been paid. The prisoner received nothing.

Farge was a subcamp under Neuengamme, which had over 60 such subcamps, allowing prisoners to live close to the construction sites and businesses to which they were hired out. The same system prevailed in all the main camps, which were spread across Germany and Poland in particular; camps had dozens of subcamps. Mortality rates were high because the labour was demanding and food inadequate. The prisoners ended up working themselves to death.



SS-oberst Max Pauly was in charge of Neuengamme and 60 subcamps from 1942. He was executed in 1946.

KZ NEUENGAMME

SS began a hasty evacuation of concentration camps. One of them was the camp at Weser.

Among the prisoners in Farge was French saboteur Francois Hockenhauer. He had been working at the Valentin bunker since August 1944, but only now did he dare to hope that the inhuman suffering would soon be over. The wind carried the distant rumble of thundering guns to him – and every day the sound was getting closer.

On 6th April, the SS began to empty his camp, a subcamp of the large Neuengamme camp near Hamburg. There, the Farge prisoners would be taken to safety – but they had to walk the whole 135 kilometres.

"We left the camp on foot in long columns, bedraggled and exhausted from hunger. We marched for four days, from early morning to late evening, without food or drink. When we could, we pulled up grass and weeds and ate them. The order was 'march or die'. Many died," recalled Hockenhauer.

Mass murder solved Jepsen's problem

7th April, near Lüneburg: Freight wagons and long marching columns took thousands of prisoners away from the front. The evacuation was chaotic.

Four hundred sick prisoners from Neuengamme's Banter Weg subcamp in Wilhelmshaven had been forced on to a freight train a few days earlier to take them to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Twelve guards made sure no one escaped. They were commanded by naval officer Rudolf Engelmann and SS-Unterscharführer Gustav Alfred Jepsen.

When the train reached Lüneburg, the railway was attacked by US bombers. At least 73 prisoners lost their lives, while a dozen managed to escape in the confusion. The survivors were gathered by the guards in a field. Jepsen had no idea what to do and sent an enquiry to Neuengamme.

The prisoners spent two days in the empty field with nothing to eat. Then lorries arrived from Bergen-Belsen and picked up 146 of them. Jepsen was left in the field with a large group of hungry, ragged prisoners. He still didn't know what would happen next. It wasn't until 11th April that he was told to execute all his prisoners.

"There were only 52 left alive. All the guards took part in the shooting. I myself shot six," he explained after the

Prisoners forced to build Germany

The SS wanted to share in the building boom that Hitler's rise to power brought with it. The Neuengamme concentration camp was set up as a Nazi brickworks.

In 1938, the SS headquarters bought a disused brickworks on the Elbe about 30 kilometres from Hamburg. Over the next few years, a gigantic brick factory for the Nazis' important buildings was built there. To transport the fired bricks from Neuengamme, the SS built a railway line and dug a canal.

Working in a brickworks required no expertise, so the SS used a large number of concentration camp prisoners. The work wore them out, but there was always a fresh supply of prisoners ready to replace them. Those with training in trades were employed in the camp's armoury. The buildings were leased by weapons manufacturer Carl Walther, who had 20,000 copies of the G43 semi-automatic rifle made there.

To boost productivity, the SS introduced a perverse reward system: efficient prisoners got access to the camp's brothel, where five female prisoners were forced to provide sexual services under strict supervision.

Neuengamme was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz, but it nevertheless developed into one of the worst camps, where half of the 106,000 prisoners died.

Neuengamme prisoners in April 1945

Soviet citizens:	34,930
Poles:	17,000
French:	11,500
Germans:	9,200
Dutch:	6,950
Belgians:	4,800
Danes:	4,300
Hungarians:	2,600
Norwegians:	2,200
Other nationalities:	11,597

The prisoners in Neuengamme had to dig a canal so that the camp's output of bricks could be transported to construction sites.

POLFOTO/DPA/RITZAU SCANPIX

war. The bodies were dumped in a mass grave dug in a nearby forest.

While the prisoners in Neuengamme had to make do with thin soup, the SS guards knew how to live it up.

AKG-IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

White buses on the way

Start of April: White buses were travelling to pick up Scandinavian prisoners from across Germany and gather them in Neuengamme.

Folke Bernadotte was travelling by car through northern Germany when he saw two white buses driving towards him. He made them stop so he could hear how the work was progressing. "Who is in command of the convoy?" he asked. A young, exhausted nurse stepped forward.

"Was it very difficult?" Bernadotte wanted to know.

"No, it might have been much worse," she replied.

The two buses had travelled all the way from the Dachau concentration camp near Munich. The first part of the journey had gone without major problems. But outside Magdeburg, they had got caught in a bombing raid. Most of the town had caught fire and the roads were being bombed, so they had to take a long detour. "That was all right but two Norwegians couldn't carry on any longer," said the nurse, pointing to the roof of one bus, where two lifeless bodies were wrapped in a tarpaulin.

Rebellion against SS in Buchenwald

8th April, Buchenwald: US troops advanced towards Weimar, near the Buchenwald concentration camp. The SS were busy emptying the overcrowded barracks of prisoners.

Gwidon Damazyn from Poland had been in the camp since 1941. He had secretly constructed a primitive radio transmitter, which he was now putting to use: "To the Allies. To the army of General Patton," Gwidon said. "This is the Buchenwald concentration camp. SOS. We request help. They want to evacuate us. The SS wants to destroy us."

Over the years, the prisoners' underground organisation had managed to steal a submachine gun and some rifles, but it wasn't enough to attempt a revolt against the well-armed guards – and the SS continued to evacuate the prisoners in long marching columns unhindered.

A few minutes after Gwidon sent his message in English, Russian and German, he received an encouraging reply:

"KZ Bu. Hold out. Rushing to your aid. Staff of Third Army."

Gwidon Damazyn collapsed with relief.

In the following days, most SS guards fled, enabling the prisoners to overcome the rest. When the Americans arrived on 11th April, the camp was controlled by the prisoners.

Unlike other camps, the SS hadn't had time to clean up Buchenwald, so corpses lay everywhere. The sight shocked the Allies and they forced Weimar's civilians to take a tour of the camp; everyone had see what Germany had done.

Buchenwald also came as a shock to Himmler. The news of the uprising terrified him, so he sent a telegram to all camp commanders: "The surrender of the camp is absolutely out of the question. The camp is to be evacuated immediately. No prisoner must fall into the hands of the enemy alive."

It wasn't just about eliminating witnesses to the Nazi atrocities – Himmler wanted as many prisoners as possible for his deal with the Western powers.

1,000 murdered in burning barn

First half of April, Celle: Trains with over 3,000 prisoners from various camps came to a standstill in the marshalling yard after an Allied air raid.

The Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp in the southern Harz Mountains had been the centre of production for V2 rockets. Prisoners had assembled the weapon in an underground factory. But a few weeks previously, the camp had been emptied and the prisoners sent by train to Neuengamme.

When the prisoners reached Celle on 5th April, the evacuation came to a standstill because the railway tracks had been bombed. There were already several trains with stranded prisoners – more than 3,000 people. The local Nazi leader, Gerhard Thiele, decided that the Mittelbau prisoners should march to the town of Gardelegen. In three columns, the exhausted people set off. Around 400 died on the way.

On 12th April, Thiele ordered the execution of any prisoners who were too sick to carry on. The next morning, he had the guards force 1,000 prisoners into a large barn. The door was barred and the building set on fire. Polish prisoner Stanislaw Waleszynski was one of only six survivors:

"The barn was filled with straw to knee height. I smelt petrol. The doors closed and I saw an SS man set the straw alight. The fire spread with lightning speed and all attempts to put it out were in vain. I approached the door and saw a prisoner using a spoon to dig away the earth under the door. I helped with my bare hands until we could sneak underneath."

Escape to Sweden

18th April: Folke Bernadotte was finally allowed to take the Scandinavian concentration camp ▶

prisoners to Sweden. Every available vehicle was scraped together for the operation – even Danish buses, which had to chug along with a gas generator due to the lack of petrol.

"How many buses can you have ready and painted white?" That was the question posed to haulage contractor Kristian Ovesen in Herning, Denmark, when he answered the phone at 16.30.

He presented the matter to his colleagues and consulted with the bodywork factory – and concluded that he could provide seven buses. They would help transport exhausted Danish and Norwegian prisoners to Sweden, he was told.

Since March, there had been hectic activity to collect prisoners from camps as far away as Mauthausen near Linz in Austria. Some of the sick had already been taken to Denmark for treatment, while the other 4,255 prisoners were gathered in the Scandinavian section in Neuengamme by agreement with Himmler.

The Danish consul general in Hamburg, Marius Yde, stubbornly negotiated with the Nazi Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann to get the last release of prisoners approved. Himmler finally agreed, and on the evening of 19th April, the official authorisation was granted.

From the German side, however, it was a condition that the evacuation was completed within 24 hours. One hundred and twenty Danish buses and lorries gathered in Padborg. The convoy could head south.

The last Scandinavians were saved

20th April: Hitler celebrated his 56th birthday in the Führerbunker. Despite his reluctance, Himmler had arrived to congratulate him. In Neuengamme, Bernadotte's evacuation drew to a close.

The white buses pulled into Neuengamme's square at 13.30. Danish prisoner Poul Verner Nielsen later recalled: "Now it was our turn. Everyone rushed to get a seat. As soon as no more could be squeezed in, the bus left. We all breathed a sigh of relief as we drove out through the gate."

Throughout the day, British fighter planes flew over the camp and bombs fell outside the camp area. Meanwhile, the buses headed towards the town of Friedrichsruh, where Bernadotte's staff had set up their headquarters and were living in tents. This was where the Scandinavian prisoners were gathered before being transported to the Danish border and then on to Sweden.

Late in the evening, a telegram arrived at the Swedish Foreign Ministry from the headquarters at Friedrichsruh announcing that Neuengamme camp had been completely emptied of Scandinavians by 21.00.

Back in the camp, there were 10,000 other prisoners who had not been so lucky.

Sick children were hanged

20th April, late evening: As soon as the last white bus had left, a German postal lorry pulled up. That night, the evidence of the worst crime in Neuengamme's history would vanish.

Since November 1944, 20 Jewish children had been living in a special ward in Neuengamme. They had been taken from the Auschwitz concentration camp to act as guinea pigs in SS doctor Kurt Heissmeyer's medical experiments. As part of his research into curing tuberculosis, he wanted to see what happened when the children's lymph nodes were removed and infectious bacteria injected into their veins and lungs.

Now Heissmeyer wanted to get rid of them as quickly as possible. SS men helped the 20 sick children into the small lorry, then it drove off through the night to a disused school in Bullenhuser Damm in Hamburg. The children were taken to the basement and undressed. An SS officer explained after the war: "They sat down on the benches and were happy that they had gotten out. They didn't suspect a thing."

The SS men give them morphine, after which the anaesthetised children were hanged. The children's carers from Neuengamme suffered the same fate. The following evening, the bodies were collected and burned in the camp's crematorium.

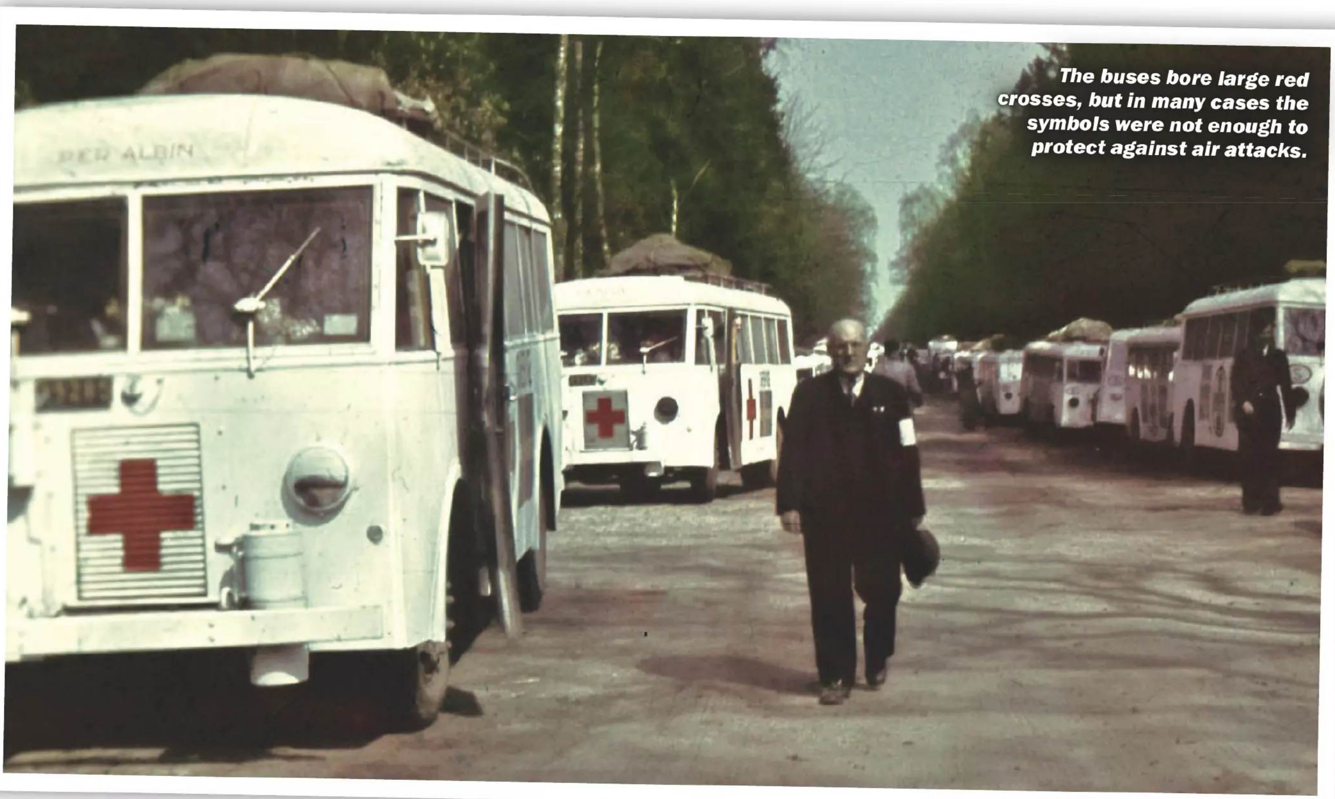
Off to Lübeck

21st April, Neuengamme: The evacuation of the large concentration camp was in full swing.

"At the other end of the camp was an endless train of *Muselmänner* [prisoners near death]. From the sick barracks they staggered, crawled or were

A thousand prisoners perished in a barn at Gardelegen. US soldiers forced German civilians to bury the dead.

AP/RITZAU SCANPIX



The buses bore large red crosses, but in many cases the symbols were not enough to protect against air attacks.

914 COLLECTION/IMAGESELECT

dragged by fellow prisoners. Many were wearing nothing but a shirt. They were pushed and piled into goods wagons," recalled Conrad Vogt-Svendsen.

He was a Norwegian seaman's chaplain in Hamburg – lately he had been staying in Neuengamme to supervise the white buses.

The Germans had been busy evacuating the rest of the camp. In recent days, some prisoners had been sent to the harbour in Lübeck, where they were transferred to cargo and passenger ships anchored in the bay.

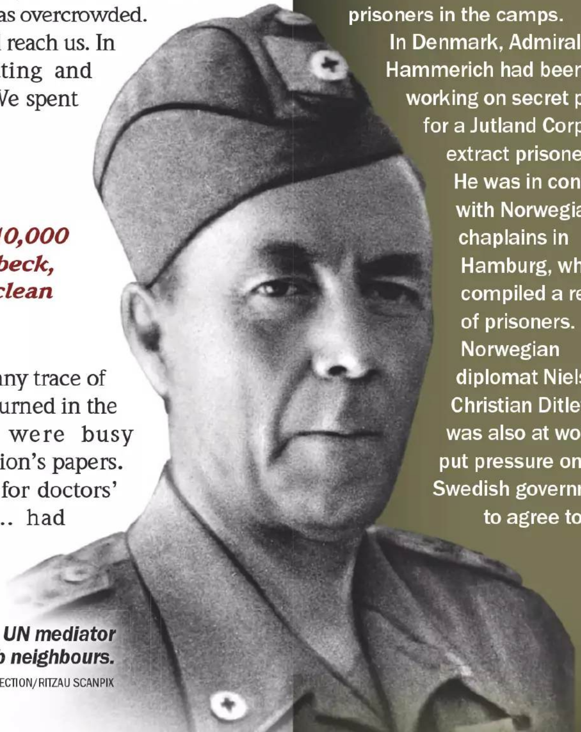
Some prisoners had to walk, but the majority were transported by train. German prisoner Ernst Schneider wrote in his diary: "After waiting half the night in the filthy freight wagons, the train started moving. Around noon on the 21st we arrived at the harbour of Lübeck, where we boarded the freighter *Thielbek*. The hold was overcrowded. It stank and not a ray of light could reach us. In the dark, people were squatting and defecating directly on the floor. We spent seven or eight days there."

Clean-up began

22nd April, Neuengamme: 10,000 prisoners had made it to Lübeck, while 700 stayed behind to clean the barracks and buildings.

The camp had to be cleansed of any trace of the atrocities. All corpses were burned in the crematorium and SS men were busy destroying the camp administration's papers.

"[SS] Dr Trzebinski ... asked for doctors' reports and death records ... had them put into sacks and burned," recalled German ▶



After the war, Bernadotte was a UN mediator between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

THE GRANGER COLLECTION/RITZAU SCANPIX

Nordic pressure fuelled white buses

Before Folke Bernadotte could begin his evacuation, it took two years of negotiation and preparation.

When the fortunes of war turned against Germany, political forces in Denmark, Norway and Sweden united to pressure the German authorities to release Scandinavian prisoners in the camps.

In Denmark, Admiral Carl Hammerich had been working on secret plans for a Jutland Corps to extract prisoners. He was in contact with Norwegian chaplains in Hamburg, who had compiled a register of prisoners. Norwegian diplomat Niels Christian Ditleff was also at work. He put pressure on the Swedish government to agree to an evacuation. With a mandate from the Swedish government, the vice president of the Swedish Red Cross, Folke Bernadotte, travelled to Berlin in February 1945 to meet with Heinrich Himmler. He initially only agreed to gather all Scandinavians in Neuengamme.

On 8th March, the first white-painted Swedish buses rolled towards Germany to pick up prisoners from as far away as Mauthausen in Austria. Norwegian prisoner Finn Hasselgård, who was picked up in Sachsenhausen, said: "We had a brutal first impression of Neuengamme. The first thing we saw was a pile of corpses outside the crematorium. They didn't have the capacity to burn all the bodies, so they were just thrown on top of each other."

Marius Yde, the Danish consul general in Hamburg, also pushed for the evacuation. In April, 120 Danish vehicles were finally given the green light to help take all the Scandinavian prisoners home.

prisoner Emil Zuleger. The chimney poured out smoke all day long.

Bernadotte helped Himmler

Night of 24th April, Lübeck: The SS leader presented his peace proposal.

Heinrich Himmler had asked for another meeting with Bernadotte, this time at the Swedish legation in Lübeck. The SS leader wanted to present his proposal for peace.

"I admit that Germany is defeated," Himmler said with emotion, and explained that Hitler would probably soon be dead. Therefore, Himmler considered himself the true leader of Germany and to save his country from destruction, he needed to negotiate peace with General Eisenhower.

"I am prepared to surrender unconditionally on the Western front, and also to discuss the ... means of arranging capitulation of the German armed forces in Denmark and Norway."

Bernadotte promised to present the request to the Swedish government, who would pass it on to Eisenhower. When leaving, Himmler declared that he would drive to the Eastern Front to fight as a regular soldier, but his car became entangled in barbed wire around the Swedish legation's property.

Floating concentration camp

26 April, Lübeck: The last train from Neuengamme arrived in Lübeck. Thousands of prisoners awaited their fate on the quay.

The *Cap Arcona* was anchored a few miles out in the bay. The former luxury liner was run-down and lacked fuel, and now it was loaded with concentration camp prisoners.

Two days later, the *Cap Arcona* housed 6,500 prisoners. On board, there was both hope and desperation. Some rumours claimed that the ship would take the prisoners to Sweden – others that the ship would be sunk with all hands.

Himmler was fired

28 April, Führerbunker in Berlin: As the Scandinavian prisoners drove across the Danish border, Hitler learned about Himmler's peace efforts.

Hitler made a sound like a wounded animal as foreign radio stations announced that the Allies had rejected Himmler's peace proposal. Hitler was dumbfounded. Of all his supporters, he had considered Himmler the most loyal – and a possible successor as head of the Nazi Reich. Now the SS leader's hideous deception had come to an end.

"A traitor must never succeed me as Führer," Hitler shouted in a frenzied rage, and demanded the arrest of the SS leader.

Peace grew closer

1st May: Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz announced in a radio address that the Führer was dead and that he was now Reich president. The war continued.

That evening on the *Cap Arcona,* Captain Heinrich Bertram contacted Erwin Geschonneck, the German representative of the prisoners' organisation on the ship. Bertram told him that Hitler was dead and that British troops were on their way, hypothesising that they might get to Neustadt as soon as the next day. The news spread like wildfire and the mood among the prisoners rose noticeably.

Meanwhile, a squadron of British planes flew over and registered the large number of ships in Lübeck Bay. The prisoners on the *Cap Arcona* waved enthusiastically.

Tragedy on prison ship

3rd May, Lübeck Bay: The night had been calm on the* Cap Arcona*. In the morning, roll call was taken as usual. Those who'd died were thrown overboard.

On board the ship was a total of 5,519 people – prisoners and crew. Despite the cramped conditions and gnawing hunger, there was an optimistic atmosphere. Freedom seemed close.

It was an unfortunate misapprehension.

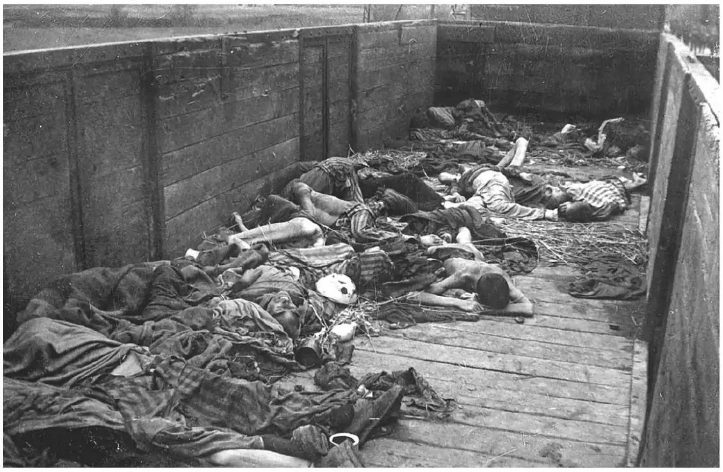
At 14.00, nine fighter-bombers led by RAF Captain Jonny Baldwin took off from Osnabrück. According to intelligence, the ships in Lübeck Bay were full of fleeing Nazis. Baldwin selected the *Cap Arcona* as the target for five of his aircraft.

None of the pilots noticed the prisoners on deck or the white sheets hanging up to signal surrender. The planes fired 40 rockets at the floating concentration camp, which was transformed into a sea of flames seconds later.

Geschonneck on the *Cap Arcona* heard the wounded screaming. The prisoners were panicking, running down the corridors. The Soviets below deck couldn't get out at all.

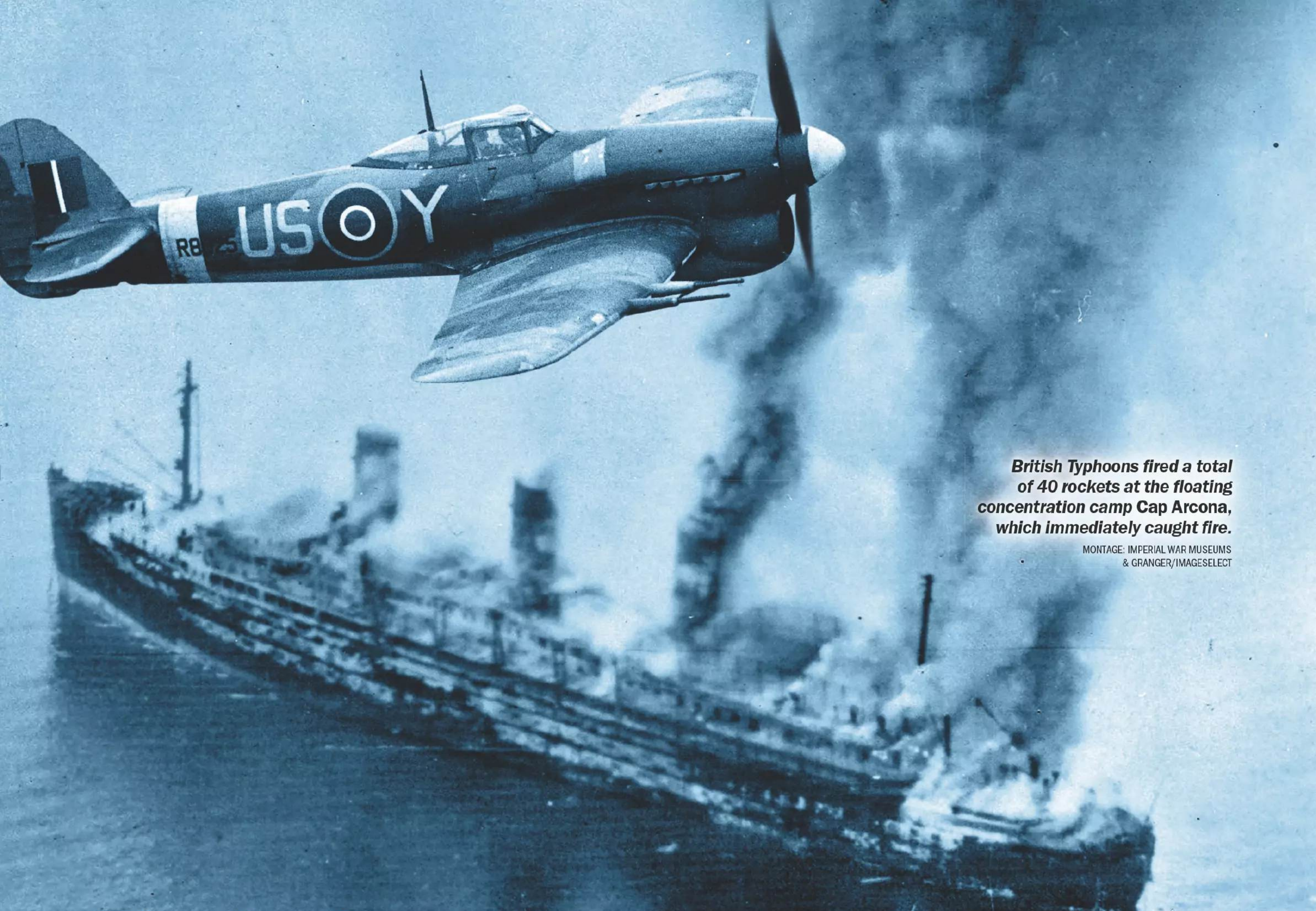
Geschonneck jumped into the water and made it to shore. One of only a few. The British planes fired at anything that moved in the water, and those who reached the beach were shot at by German soldiers. Only 350 prisoners survived from the *Cap Arcona.* For days, bodies drifted on to the beach.

Postscript: *Historians estimate that around 200,000 camp prisoners died in the final months of the war as a result of death marches, executions and Allied attacks. The white buses saved 7,795 Scandinavians, and Bernadotte was also allowed to take 7,550 others. These included French, Belgian, Dutch and Polish women from Ravensbrück.*



DON TROIANI/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

The SS guards gave up clearing up after themselves. Goods wagons that had brought prisoners to the Dachau camp near Munich were left on the tracks.



British Typhoons fired a total of 40 rockets at the floating concentration camp **Cap Arcona***, which immediately caught fire.*

MONTAGE: IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS & GRANGER/IMAGESELECT

The last survivor

Dutch forced labourer Wim Aloserij managed to escape from the *Cap Arcona* when British planes attacked the ship with thousands of concentration camp prisoners on board.

Dutch Wim Aloserij was 21 years old when he was sent to Germany in 1943. Wim refused to work for the Germans and fled as a stowaway on a train back to the Netherlands.

His life in hiding ended the following year, when he was arrested during a raid and taken to the Amersfoort transit camp. After just a few weeks, he was taken to Neuengamme and on to Husum-Schwesing to dig trenches. The alcoholic SS-Untersturmführer (Second Lieutenant) Hans Hermann Griem, who liked to fire shots at his prisoners, worked there.

In December 1944, it was back to Neuengamme, where Wim stayed until the end to remove the evidence of Nazi crimes. On 29th April, he stood on the quay in Lübeck, and after a few days on board the freighter *Athen,* boarded the former luxury liner *Cap Arcona.* It looked like the *Titanic,* but the ship was actually a floating concentration camp.

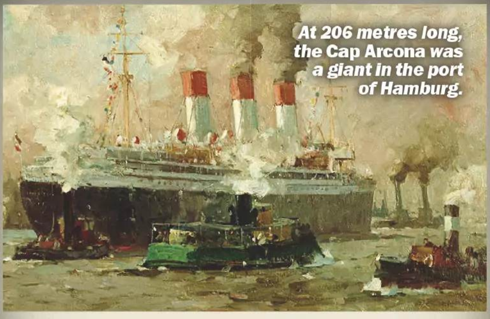
Wim quickly guessed that the ship was going to be destroyed, and started looking for a way to escape. While his fellow prisoners grew weaker, he remained clear-headed.

When the RAF attacked the ship with rockets and bombs – and the prisoners burned to death below deck – Wim hid in the galley. Using a rope and an inflatable raft, he was able to get ashore.

Wim Aloserij was the last survivor to recount the horrors of the *Cap Arcona*. His memoir, *The Last Survivor,* written by Frank Krake, was published just before his death in 2018. Wim was 94 years old.

***Wim survived three camps and the* Cap Arcona.**

DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE/IMAGESELECT



At 206 metres long, the **Cap Arcona** *was a giant in the port of Hamburg.*

AKG-IMAGES/RITZAU SCANPIX

Queen of the South Atlantic

The 1,365 passengers sat in silk-lined saloons, and in the evenings an orchestra played dance music. But on 25th October 1939, the captain received the radio signal "QW7": the company was to hand over the ship to the Kriegsmarine.

The *Cap Arcona* served as an army accommodation ship before sailing German refugees to Copenhagen in February and March 1945. The worn-out ship then anchored in Lübeck Bay. There it was seized by Hamburg's Gauleiter, Karl Kaufmann. Now the ship was to be crammed full of concentration camp prisoners.

GERMANY WAS CUT IN HALF

25th April 1945 has gone down in history as "Elbe Day" – the day Allied soldiers from the Western and Eastern Fronts met. No one had planned for the event, so the Soviets launched a strike against the Americans. The shots would be the first of the Cold War.

One of the most iconic images of the war shows the first meeting of the Allied armies – albeit via a reconstruction 24 hours later.

AKG-IMAGES

BY ESBEN MØNSTER-KJÆR

The photograph of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 is meant to convey resolve – yet in reality it simply shows three elderly gentlemen in comfortable chairs.

There was none of the drama that characterised the iconic photos chronicling the decisive moments of the war – for example, from the German town of Torgau, where the US and Soviet forces met for the first time.

> **"How empty the brains of these three charlatans must be!"**
>
> Joseph Goebbels on Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt.

Yet the group photo from Yalta is one of the most famous photographs of World War II because of the concentration of power that the three men represented. In 1945, they alone had the power to shape the world, and that's exactly what they did during the conference held in the old Tsarist palace in the Crimean city of Yalta.

On the agenda was the final showdown with Japan. The trio also argued over Poland, which Britain had gone to war to defend in 1939 – and which Stalin had now firmly set his sights on. But first and foremost, the 'Big Three' would decide the future of Germany.

Goebbels raged against Yalta

The Yalta Agreement was no secret. On the contrary – it was published in a joint declaration on 11th February 1945.

"It is our inflexible purpose to destroy German militarism and Nazism and to ensure that Germany will never again be able to disturb the peace of the world," the declaration read. That's why World War II's victors would dissolve the German state apparatus and the country's military.

They also intended to shut down or seize those parts of the manufacturing process that could be used for military purposes. In addition, Germany would have to compensate other countries. These safeguards would be implemented by dividing the country into occupation zones. The French could also look forward to being offered a slice, and the Poles were promised permanent ownership of large areas of land in eastern Germany.

Among those reading the statement was Germany's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who made a bitter comment.

"How empty the brains of these three charlatans must be – at least in the case of two of them!" he taunted. The words appeared in his article entitled 'The Year 2000', in which he painted a bleak vision of the future after a German defeat.

"The third, Stalin, follows much more far-reaching goals than his two comrades. He certainly does not plan to announce them publicly," Goebbels forecast.

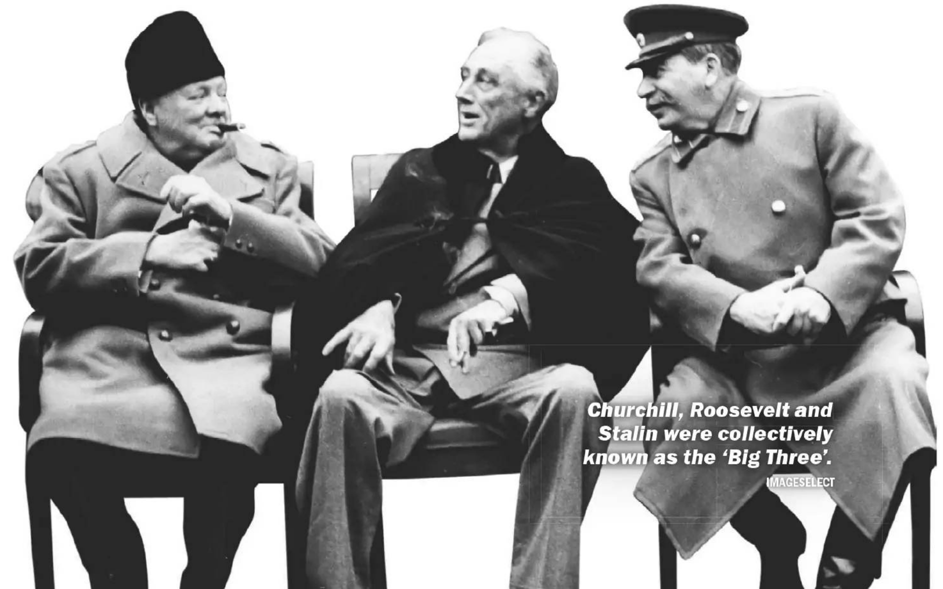
He predicted how US isolationism and Soviet intrusion would upset the balance of power between the three powers so that Europe would eventually be mercilessly handed over to Stalin. But of course, the agreement was completely irrelevant, Goebbels pointed out, because Germany would not lose the war.

In the real world, Germany's defeat was fast approaching. Dwight D Eisenhower, the US general and commander-in-chief of the Allied forces on the Western Front, had already reached the Rhine.

To stop the offensive, the Germans had blown up all the bridges over the wide river. Except one.

Churchill wanted to occupy Berlin

The fact that the important bridge at Remagen near Bonn hadn't been ▶


Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin were collectively known as the 'Big Three'.

IMAGESELECT

Yalta left Germans toothless

SOVIET UNION
YALTA

One week in early February 1945, the 'Big Three' – Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt – met in an old Tsarist palace near the city of Yalta on the Crimean Peninsula. Here they negotiated the world's future after its victory over Nazism.

The three parties had very different interests: Churchill suspected Stalin of wanting to subjugate all of Europe and tried to enlist the support of Roosevelt. But the US President concentrated his energies on the United Nations, which would bring peace between the countries of the world. For this project, Roosevelt needed Stalin's support, so he made concessions to the Soviet leader, whose goal was to secure control over Eastern Europe.

Meeting's outcomes

- After the war, Germany must be occupied and disarmed, and its inhabitants undergo a thorough de-Nazification process.
- German war criminals should be judged by an international court.
- Germany must pay war reparations.
- Germany had to cede the province of East Prussia to the Soviets.
- Poland was to give up its eastern provinces to the Soviet Union and receive German territories as compensation.
- The Soviet Union would declare war on Japan.

France demanded a place among the victors

The leader of the Free French forces, Charles de Gaulle, was not invited to Yalta. He was offered an occupation zone in Germany – yet he was furious and demanded that his country be respected as a great power on equal footing with the other three.

Stalin tried to ignore de Gaulle, while Roosevelt had loathed him for years; only Churchill thought he was indispensable. Churchill predicted that the US would return home after the war and that the British would need de Gaulle as an ally.

Charles De Gaulle.

IMAGESELECT

destroyed was due to a series of accidents: firstly, while the Germans had placed the explosives well in advance, the order to detonate arrived very late.

Then, the trigger didn't work, so a lone soldier had to run a gauntlet of US gunfire to manually ignite the explosives.

The explosion enveloped the bridge in smoke, but the large steel arches were undamaged. The explosives had been poor quality and only some had gone off. Before the rest could be detonated, US troops rushed forward and cut the fuses. The bridge was captured – and it remained so even after a furious Hitler had executed the senior German officer at Remagen.

All Eisenhower had to do now was occupy the part of Germany that the US and British were entitled to under the Yalta Agreement. On 28th March, he announced to the Red Army that he intended to push eastwards, as far as the Elbe River, then turn north and south.

Eisenhower considered his telegram (registration number SCAF-252) a regular military coordination between allies, but Churchill was red hot with rage.

The UK Prime Minister wanted to be the first in Berlin – even though the German capital was in the Soviet occupation zone according to the Yalta Agreement.Its occupation was important because Churchill wanted to use the city to blackmail Stalin, who was wavering on his promise of a democratic Poland.

> "I am convinced that the US Ninth Army could have captured Berlin."
>
> General William Hood Simpson, commander of the US Ninth Army.

"Berlin is only a political objective, not a military objective", Eisenhower argued. In his eyes, war and diplomacy were two different things that should be kept separate. Churchill had to bend because by 1945, Britain had clearly become the little brother in her alliance with the mighty United States.

American reached out to Berlin

The US incursion into Germany proceeded at a furious pace. In the open countryside, US armoured columns met only weak German resistance and after a swift advance, the first American soldiers reached the west bank of the Elbe on 11th April. US Ninth Army Commander William H Simpson was full of conquering fervour as he sent troops across the river to establish two bridgeheads.

"We'd been the first to the Rhine and now we were going to be the first to Berlin", he explained later. "All along we thought of just one thing – capturing Berlin, going through and meeting the Russians on the other side."

The German Reich capital was just 80 kilometres away. General Simpson ordered an armoured division to prepare alongside a division of infantry in trucks. In his estimation, just one night of hard driving would take them all the way to their objective.

On 15th April, the eager Simpson asked for permission from his superior, General Omar Bradley, who presented the case to Eisenhower.

The news from the Elbe put Eisenhower in a tight spot: his generals expected to be sent to the East, because they knew nothing about SCAF-252. Only Eisenhower and Bradley knew that Berlin was no longer a target for the Western powers. Their decision to let the Soviets move into Berlin alone had been kept secret to keep the troops fighting.

Eisenhower made his decision

There was still time for the commander-in-chief to change his mind and unleash the tanks. Eisenhower therefore asked General Bradley to estimate how many casualties a lightning advance on Berlin would cause. In response, he received a pessimistic estimate that the advance and subsequent urban combat could cost 100,000 dead and wounded Americans.

"It would be a pretty stiff price to pay for a prestige objective," said Bradley. "Especially when we know that we've got to pull back and let the other fellow take over."

Eisenhower chose to stick to his original choice: the Western powers were not going to Berlin. Bradley relayed the disheartening news to General Simpson, who regretted it for the rest of his life.

"I am convinced that the US Ninth Army could have captured Berlin well ahead of the Russians", the disappointed general wrote later. He never doubted that Bradley's calculations were wrong. Six years after the end of the war, Omar Bradley had come to the same conclusion.

"At that time we could probably have pushed on to Berlin", he admitted in his memoirs, published in 1951. "As soldiers, we looked ▶

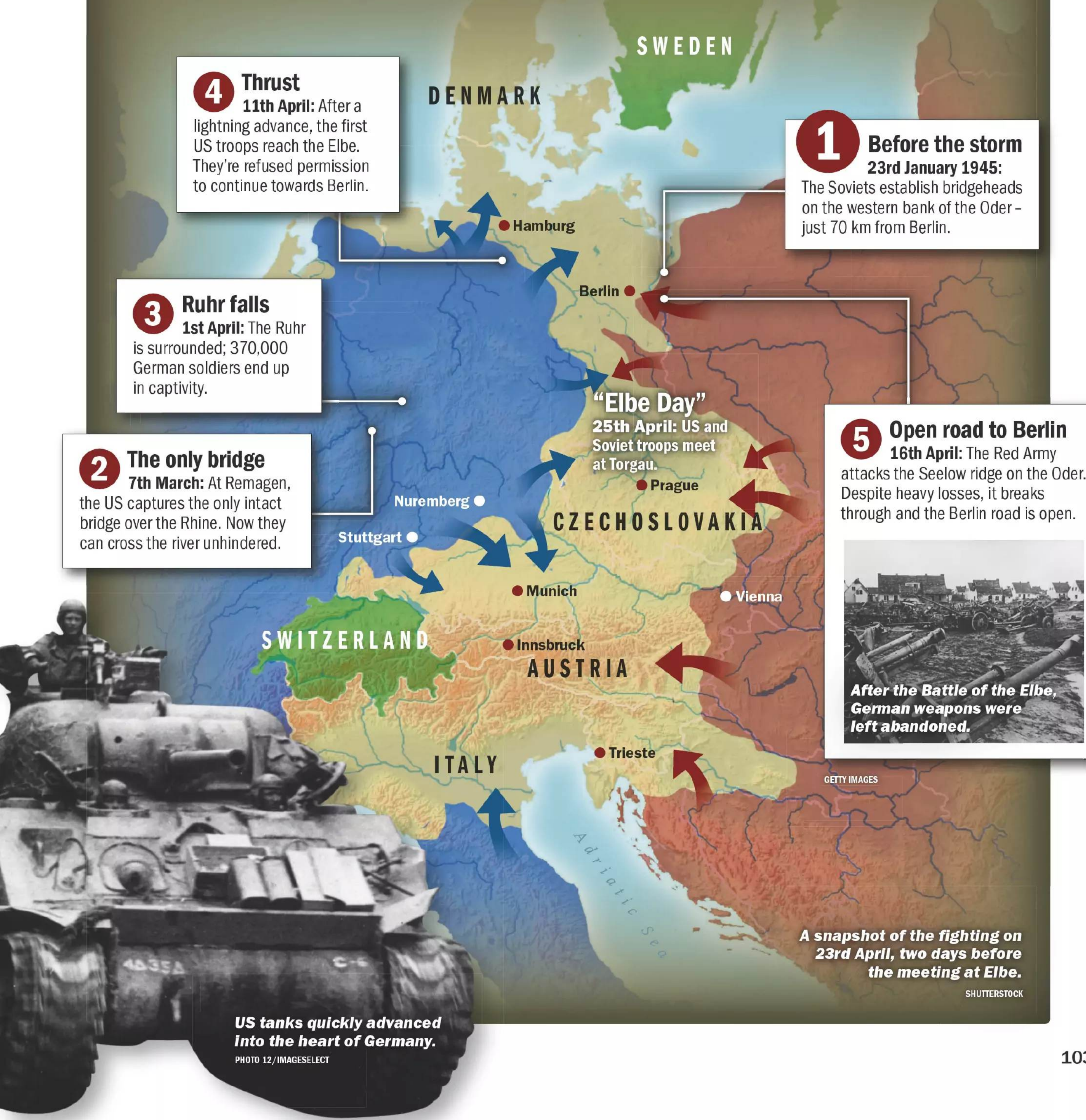
US and UK took the biggest bite

Allied forces poured into Germany in 1945. US and British troops took more than they were allowed to under the agreement with Stalin.

German troops put up little resistance after the US and British crossed the Rhine in March 1945. The Eastern Front, on the other hand, stood still while Soviet forces prepared for the major offensive against Berlin. As a result, American soldiers came within range of the German capital.

General Eisenhower, who was in command on the Western Front, had no plans to occupy Berlin. He ordered his troops to stop at the Elbe and move south towards the Alps and north towards Denmark to stop a possible Soviet invasion. Along the way, the Western Powers occupied large areas of land that would become part of the Soviet occupation zone after the war.

🟨 Nazi Germany (23rd April 1945)
🟥 Red Army conquests
🟦 Conquests by Western powers
🟩 Neutral countries



1 Before the storm

23rd January 1945: The Soviets establish bridgeheads on the western bank of the Oder – just 70 km from Berlin.

2 The only bridge

7th March: At Remagen, the US captures the only intact bridge over the Rhine. Now they can cross the river unhindered.

3 Ruhr falls

1st April: The Ruhr is surrounded; 370,000 German soldiers end up in captivity.

4 Thrust

11th April: After a lightning advance, the first US troops reach the Elbe. They're refused permission to continue towards Berlin.

5 Open road to Berlin

16th April: The Red Army attacks the Seelow ridge on the Oder. Despite heavy losses, it breaks through and the Berlin road is open.

After the Battle of the Elbe, German weapons were left abandoned.

GETTY IMAGES

"Elbe Day"

25th April: US and Soviet troops meet at Torgau.

A snapshot of the fighting on 23rd April, two days before the meeting at Elbe.

SHUTTERSTOCK

US tanks quickly advanced into the heart of Germany.

PHOTO 12/IMAGESELECT

naively on this British inclination to complicate the war with political foresight and nonmilitary objectives."

Nevertheless, the decision had been made and the roles assigned. Simpson's Ninth Army and other US forces had to content themselves with digging in along the Elbe as they advanced along the river.

On 16th April, the day following Eisenhower's decision to halt at the Elbe, more than one million Soviet soldiers attacked the German defence line along the Oder River. It was the beginning of Stalin's assault on Berlin.

Awkward first meeting

Barely two weeks after General Simpson had the Elbe in his sights, other US troops approached the river 130 kilometres further south-east. The 69th Infantry Division was well ahead of its neighbouring units, and patrols set out on 25th April to find out what the situation was further ahead.

Lieutenant Albert Kotzebue led one such patrol. White flags hung out of the windows of the houses along the road, but he saw no people – and he knew why. A German mayor had told him that the Red Army was near. The local Germans feared they would become victims of rape and looting. Kotzebue stopped at a farm where he found the farmer, his wife and their three children gathered around the dinner table. It looked cosy – except that all five were dead. They had taken poison.

The patrol continued towards the Elbe, where they found a small boat. A handful of soldiers jumped aboard and rowed across, using their rifle butts as oars. On the other side, they found the riverbank littered with dead civilians. German men, women and children were lying everywhere with luggage scattered around them.

Shortly after, a Soviet patrol appeared. Kotzebue saluted. So did the others, after which both parties scowled warily at each other. The situation didn't lend itself to embraces and comradely pats on the back. It was 13.30 and the West had finally met the East in the middle of enemy territory – at a hamlet called Strehla.

Lieutenant explored Germany

Kotzebue was the first American to make contact with Soviet soldiers in Germany, but he gained no fame for this historic moment. When the news of the "meeting on the Elbe" hit the front pages of the newspapers, its star was another officer from elsewhere on the Elbe.

Lieutenant William D Robertson was an intelligence officer in the same regiment as Kotzebue. Around 10.00 on the morning of 25th April, he took to the roads to try to get an overview of the chaos that surrounded the Americans: the roads were swarming with dejected German soldiers, released Allied prisoners of war and foreign forced labourers.

The lone jeep with the lieutenant and three privates had barely started before they encountered the enemy – everything from lone German soldiers on rattling bicycles to entire companies trudging tired and dirty westwards with hopelessness in their eyes.

Robertson disarmed them and handed them instructions to show at the first US position ahead. No one tried to attack the jeep and in the villages, the Germans gave them a friendly reception.

As recently as 27th March 1945, V2 rockets hit London, claiming over 100 lives…

SHUTTERSTOCK

After Churchill raised the possibility of war with the Soviets, he lost power in the July election.

GETTY IMAGES

At midday, the patrol came across 30 British PoWs. They told them that a group of US wounded and prisoners were in a town called Torgau, which was further up the Elbe. Robertson confiscated a white sheet from a German civilian and the jeep sped towards the river.

Soviets fired on the Americans

The lone jeep arrived in Torgau without difficulty. However, Robertson could hear gunfire nearby, and further away the rumble of guns – they were clearly entering a combat zone.

Robertson pondered how to approach the Red Army without being mowed down. He cursed the fact that he hadn't brought a US flag. Instead, he decided to make one himself. The soldiers broke into a pharmacy where they found red and blue paint. They quickly slapped the colours onto the sheet so that, with a fair wind, it resembled the 'Stars and Stripes'.

Robertson waved the flag from the top of a tower in Hartenfels Castle, which

In Torgau, the US and Soviet privates could party – their leaders were already enemies.

AKG-IMAGES

rose above the west bank of the Elbe. At the same time, he shouted "Amerikanski", "Russia", "America" and "Kamerad".

Robertson thought he was making contact, but he was wrong. Soon bursts of gunfire whistled across the water, hitting the masonry and convincing him that he was the target. That point was emphasised when an anti-tank shell struck the tower.

The lieutenant crouched behind the thick wall, desperately waving his arms, hoping not to get them shot off. Then the rain of bullets suddenly ceased and a green flare rose from the opposite bank: the signal for Allied forces to use if they encountered each other.

Unfortunately, Robertson had no green flares to respond, and the soldiers on the other bank started firing again.

First meeting was forgotten

The Americans' saviour was a Soviet prisoner of war. Robertson's patrol had found him in Torgau and instructed him in German what to shout across the river. After five minutes, he was able to inform Robertson that some people would be coming over.

The prisoner of war started to climb out onto the twisted steel skeleton that had previously served as a bridge over the Elbe. Robertson followed. After some hesitation, a Soviet started in the opposite direction and the two parties approached each other with difficulty.

Out on the bridge, Robertson crawled on his hands and knees to hold on as a Soviet soldier came hurtling down a bridge span towards him. In this momentous instant, Robertson couldn't think of anything historic to say. Instead, he smiled broadly like an idiot and patted the Soviet on the knee. It was 16.00 – US and Soviet soldiers were shaking hands in the middle of a shattered Germany.

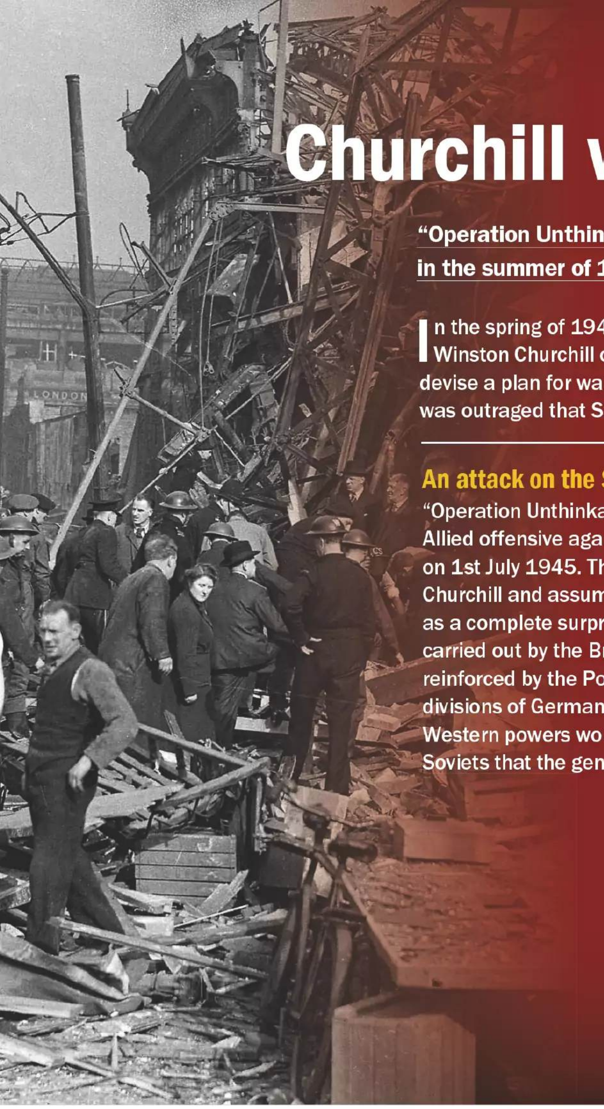
US Lieutenant Robertson smiled broadly like an idiot and patted the Soviet on the knee.

In Torgau, spontaneous parties broke out among the troops when the Russian soldiers took out their accordions. No one would know of Kotzebue or his own awkward encounter with the Red Army amid the massacred Germans on the riverbank hours earlier.

The next day, Lieutenant Robertson and the first Soviet on the bridge, Lieutenant Aleksandr Silvashko, had to repeat the scene on the bridge for the benefit of the cameras.

The images from Torgau travelled around the world as they heralded the defeat of Nazi Germany – even though the fighting continued for two more weeks. Germany had been cut in half and the Allies could triumph. Few realised – like Churchill – that a new conflict was brewing. Most fervently hoped that the world was entering an age of peace and brotherhood between the nations of the world.

By July 1945, Churchill had already lost the British election and it was up to the new Labour government to stand firm against Stalin. The world was entering a new age: the Cold War. ■



Churchill was betting on a new war

"Operation Unthinkable" was the British bid to fight a war against Stalin in the summer of 1945. The plan shows why it never materialised.

In the spring of 1945, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered the General Staff to devise a plan for war against the Soviet Union. He was outraged that Stalin had broken his promises of democratic elections in Poland. Six years earlier, the British had declared war on Hitler in defence of the country's independence. Now, it appeared the Poles would be subjugated to the Soviets instead.

An attack on the Soviets would be a disaster

"Operation Unthinkable" was the code word for an Allied offensive against the Soviet Union starting on 1st July 1945. The plan was prepared for Churchill and assumed that the attack would come as a complete surprise to the Soviets. It was to be carried out by the British and Americans, reinforced by the Polish exile army and ten divisions of German prisoners of war. However, the Western powers would be so outnumbered by the Soviets that the generals advised against the plan.

Defensive strategy would have no chance

Churchill also instructed his generals to calculate what would happen when Germany was defeated and the US moved its troops to the war against Japan. This situation could tempt Stalin to attack Western Europe, Churchill feared. In their defence plan, the generals predicted that after a Soviet attack, the British would be pushed back to the British Isles. After that, heavy bombers would be the only weapon that could hit Stalin.

THE WEST DIDN'T STAND A CHANCE

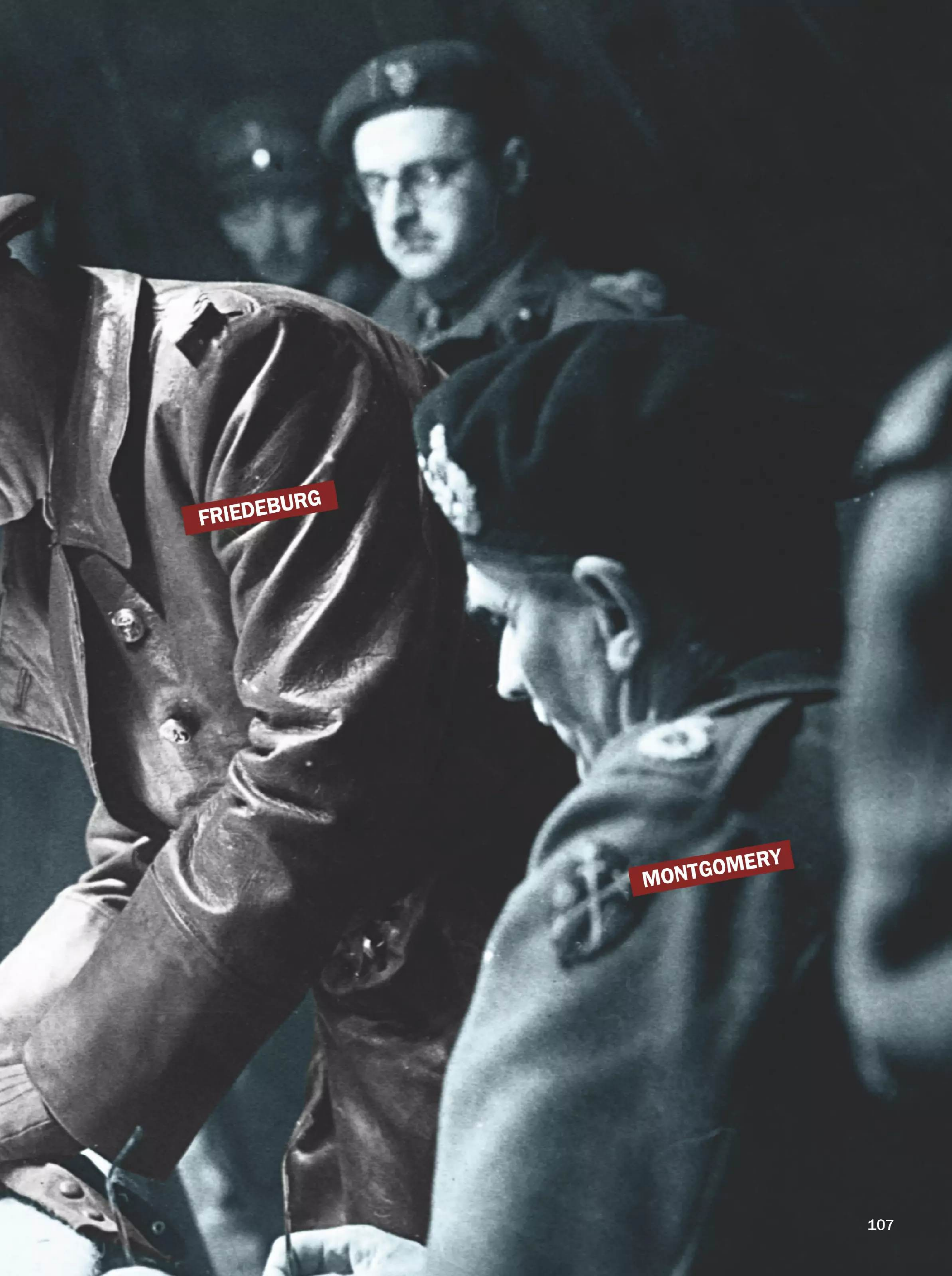
WESTERN POWERS		SOVIET UNION	
Infantry divisions:	80	Infantry divisions:	228
Armoured divisions:	23	Armoured divisions:	36
Light bombers:	6,048	Light bombers:	11,802
Heavy bombers:	2,750	Heavy bombers:	960

The Allies demanded that Germany surrendered unconditionally. However, when the German negotiators approached Bernard Montgomery, it was to entice the Western powers to break the alliance with the Soviet Union – at the last moment before Armageddon.

HITLER'S HEIRS HAD TO SAVE GERMANY

The German chief negotiator Hans-Georg von Friedeburg reluctantly signed the surrender. Beforehand, Field Marshal Montgomery had threatened that otherwise he would continue the war and would be "delighted to do so".

HISTORICAL/GETTY IMAGES



FRIEDEBURG
MONTGOMERY

BY ESBEN MØNSTER-KJÆR AND TORSTEN WEPER

The Germans suspected nothing when the Reich radio played a funeral hymn in the middle of the evening programme on Tuesday 1st May. Then a speaker interrupted the music. It was 22.25, and his voice could only be described as euphoric. "It is reported from the Führer's headquarters that our Führer, Adolf Hitler, has fallen." On Monday, Grand Admiral Dönitz was appointed as his successor.

Dönitz needed no introduction. Every German knew him as the U-boat admiral, responsible for countless attacks against the Allies. Back in 1939, he'd ridden through Berlin in an open carriage while the city's citizens cheered in the streets. Since then, newspapers had celebrated him as a hero – and Hitler trusted him implicitly. In 1943, Dönitz was given command of the entire navy, and now the grand admiral stood before the microphone in a new role. "In deepest sorrow and reverence the German people bow," began Dönitz. "He recognised the terrible danger of Bolshevism at an early date and dedicated his existence to this struggle."

He then outlined his plan for the future: "It is my first task to save Germany from destruction by the advancing Bolshevist enemy. For this aim alone the military struggle continues."

As a convinced Nazi, Dönitz refused to surrender if capitulation meant the Germans had to submit to the mercy of the Red Army. If he could have, he would have turned the weapons eastward immediately, but Germany had other enemies as well. "As far and for so long as achievement of this aim is impeded by the British and the Americans, we shall be forced to carry on our defensive fight against them as well … For all this I need your help. Give me your confidence because your road is mine as well. Maintain order and discipline in town and country," Dönitz appealed that late evening.

INTERFOTO AWKZ/IMAGESELECT

The day after Hitler's death, naval chief Karl Dönitz became Germany's leader.

Delayed post from Berlin

Earlier the same day: Before the new Reich president could deliver his radio address, he had to forge several swift alliances and keep SS leader Himmler at bay.

The announcement that Karl Dönitz had been chosen to become the country's next Reich president had reached him just a day and a half earlier – on 30th April. Yet there was no word from Berlin that Hitler was dead. Dönitz only learned of this at lunchtime on 1st May, prompting a flurry of activity to assemble a government. He spent hours on the phone recruiting ministers. In his will, Hitler had allocated positions, but Dönitz was unaware of that list – nor did he know that the Führer had demanded in his testament that the war should continue by all means. Naively, Dönitz believed that Hitler wanted him to end the war.

Heinrich Himmler was one of those who approached Dönitz seeking a ministerial position. Although the SS leader had been dismissed by Hitler, Himmler still believed he held the key to the future.

He still controlled parts of the SS, making him a dangerous figure for Dönitz. It was crucial to keep him at arm's length without offending him. They dined together that evening, and the SS chief revealed that the Nazi leader in Hamburg planned to surrender the city to the British without resistance. This news made Dönitz explode – if everyone acted on their own, how was he supposed to fulfil his mission? If the country was to be saved, everyone needed to stand united.

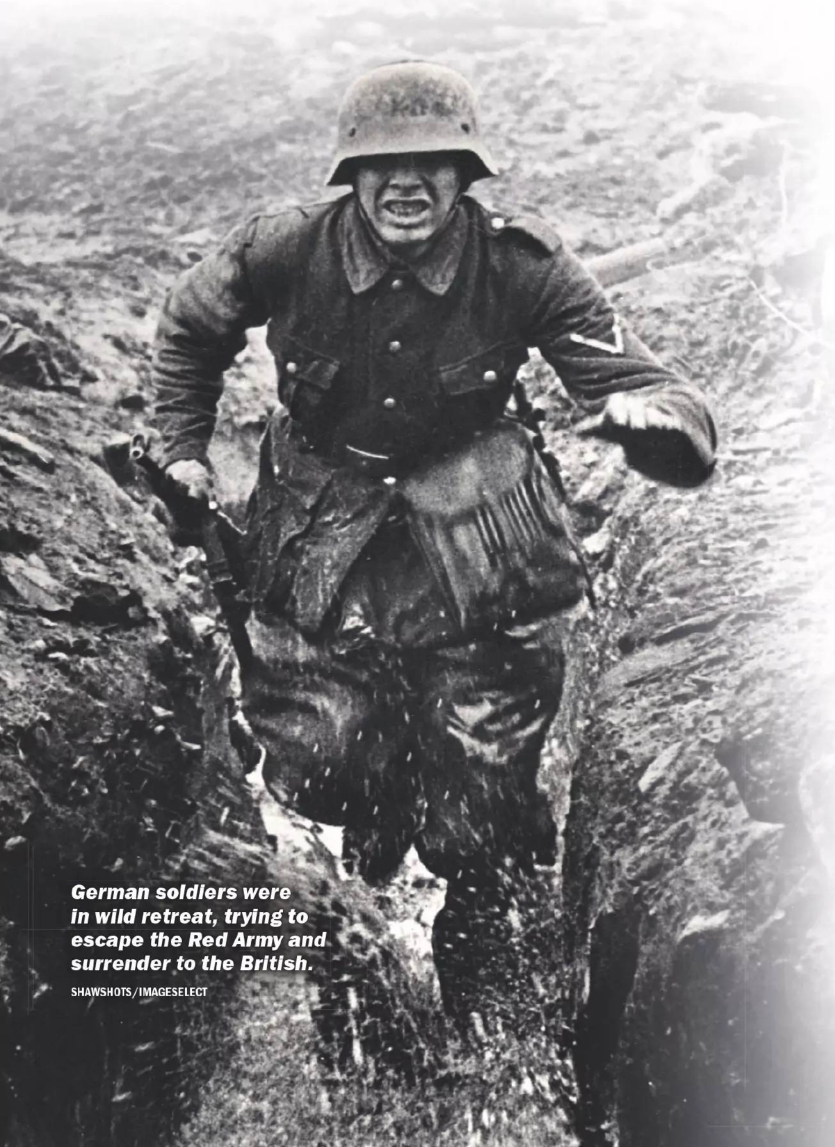
Dönitz searched for a strategy

2nd May: The German forces in Italy surrendered, and the Allies continued to make significant advances into Germany. With great difficulty, Dönitz maintained control over the northern part of the country as well as the occupied nations of Norway, Denmark and parts of the Netherlands.

Germany's new government met at the town hall in Eutin, a small town north of Lübeck. In the red-brick building by the square, no one believed in a victorious future. Dönitz recognised that the military situation was hopeless.

Some ministers recommended an immediate surrender to avoid further bombings of German cities. In contrast, several generals demanded fighting to the last man.

As a compromise, Dönitz decided that the fighting would continue for the time being. This would give the navy more time for Operation Hannibal – a large-scale evacuation of soldiers and civilians stranded in enclaves along the ▶



German soldiers were in wild retreat, trying to escape the Red Army and surrender to the British.

SHAWSHOTS/IMAGESELECT

German peace negotiator wandered across Europe

Reich President Dönitz and his peace negotiators took an entire week to capitulate. The delay was intended to save as many Germans as possible from the Red Army.

3rd May Off to Montgomery: Admiral Friedeburg leaves Flensburg and crosses the front at Hamburg. The target is British Field Marshal Montgomery's headquarters at Lüneburg. German hopes for peace with the Western powers are dashed.

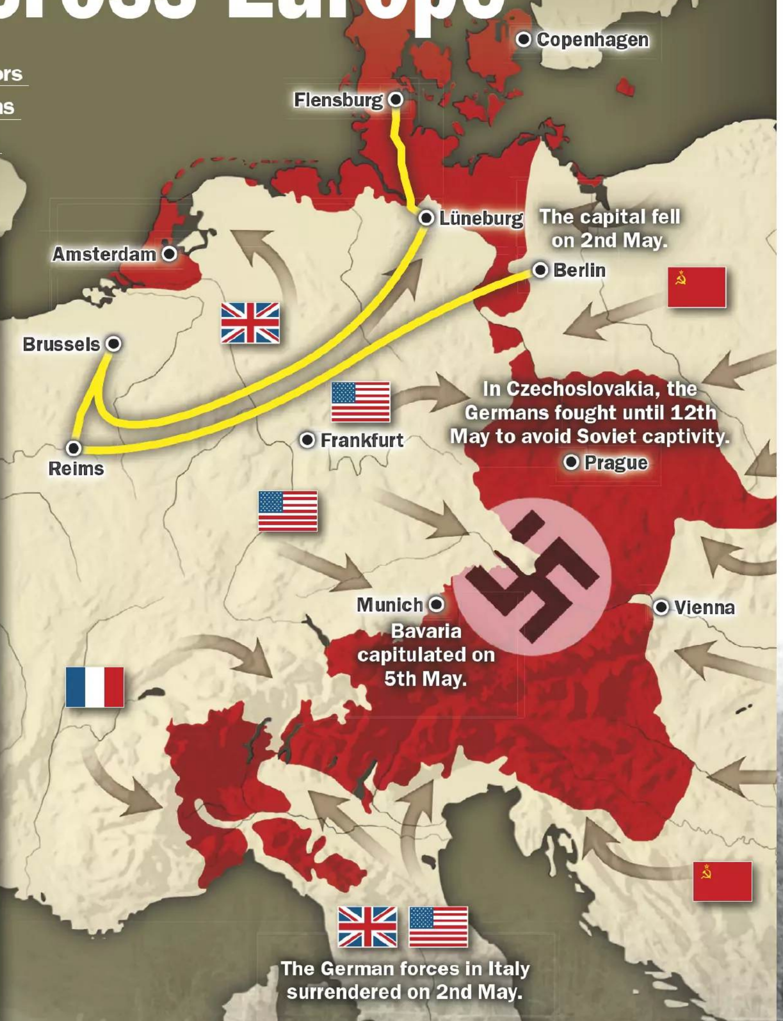
3rd May Return to Flensburg Friedeburg has to return to Dönitz to obtain a mandate to sign a capitulation for the German troops in the Netherlands, Denmark and north-west Germany.

4th May Another visit to Montgomery: During his second visit to the British commander, Friedeburg capitulates. The agreement for the north-western fronts takes effect the following morning.

5th May Onward to Eisenhower: Friedeburg continues his journey in a British plane to Reims, where the supreme commander of the Western Allies, General Eisenhower, is stationed. Poor weather results in the plane being diverted to Brussels, with the journey continuing by car. After a two-day nerve-wracking stand-off, the Germans finally sign. Weapons across Europe are to fall silent from 9th May at 00:00.

8th May Once more for Joseph Stalin: Stalin is dissatisfied with the events in Reims and demands a new signing in Berlin. The Germans are flown to the bombed-out city, and the capitulation is repeated.

10th May Back in Flensburg: Friedeburg returns to Dönitz at the naval academy in Flensburg to report on the events.



The capital fell on 2nd May.

In Czechoslovakia, the Germans fought until 12th May to avoid Soviet captivity.

Bavaria capitulated on 5th May.

The German forces in Italy surrendered on 2nd May.

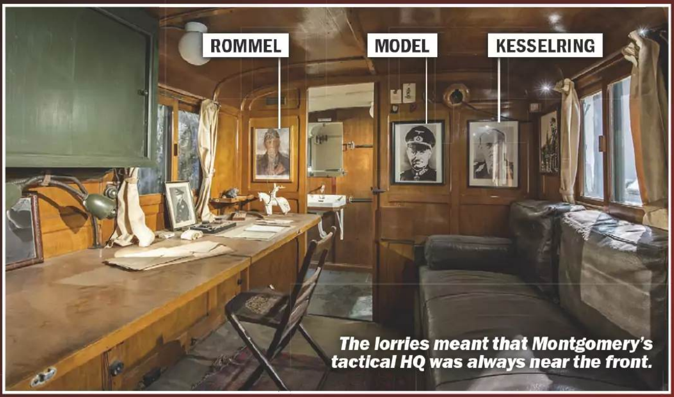
FRIEDEBURG'S MERCEDES

The car carrying the German chief negotiator, Friedeburg, was stopped at a British checkpoint.

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS

Montgomery lived on a campsite

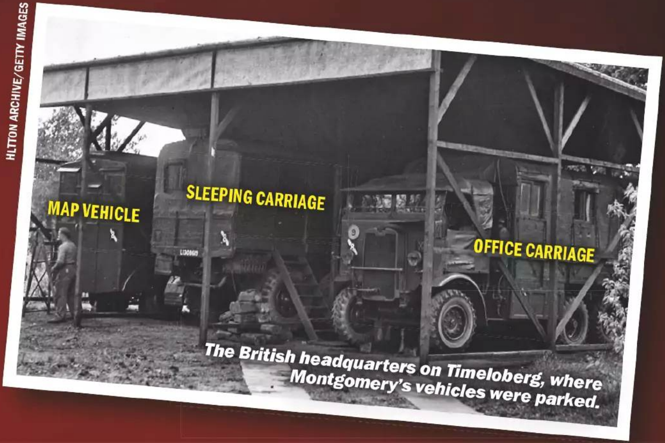
The soldiers needed to know that their commander understood the situation at the front, so the British field marshal fought his war from the back of three lorries.



IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS

The lorries meant that Montgomery's tactical HQ was always near the front.

THE OFFICE VAN During the African campaign in 1942, Montgomery confiscated an Italian general's mobile command centre. On the walls, Montgomery hung portraits of his opponents. He would look at these when trying to guess their next move. The van also featured a bathroom.



HLTTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

The British headquarters on Timeloberg, where Montgomery's vehicles were parked.

MONTGOMERY

THE MAP VEHICLE While preparing for D-Day, Montgomery added a new lorry to his fleet. The walls were covered with maps, which were updated with the latest developments at the front. Montgomery also had a sleeping carriage. Bedtime was always at 21.30.

IWM/GETTY IMAGES

Baltic Sea, cut off by the Red Army's advance through Latvia, Lithuania and East Prussia.

On land, a corridor along the coast east of Lübeck was to be kept open to allow Army Group Vistula to escape their Soviet pursuers. Two weeks earlier, these soldiers had been defending Berlin from positions along the Oder River – since then, they had retreated north-west to avoid Soviet captivity.

General Alfred Jodl, from the military high command in Berlin, finally arrived to meet Dönitz. Since 1939, Jodl had been one of Hitler's closest advisors. Now he assured his new leader that the troops would keep the corridor open. Moments later, however, his claim was contradicted by an agitated voice on the phone. Dönitz's adjutant had called a contact in Lübeck, who brought alarming news. "[T]here's such a racket in the streets, one tank after another is rolling past … yes, all British," the adjutant's contact shouted into the phone. "Do you want to listen?"

The man in Lübeck held the receiver out the window, and an infernal noise of caterpillar tracks and roaring engines came through clearly. Montgomery's forces had thwarted the Red Army's chance to push into Jutland – and Dönitz had lost his rescue corridor. The new head of state was forced to negotiate with the Western Allies immediately.

Thousands of orphaned children wandered around Germany after the war – they were known as "wolf children".
STATE PARLIAMENT OF BRANDENBURG

German envoy reached the British

3rd May at 08.00: A German delegation was appointed to negotiate with British Field Marshal Montgomery, who commanded the Allied troops in north-west Germany.

The Berliners had surrendered to the Red Army the day before, and on 3rd May, Hamburg was set to capitulate to the British. Allied bombing raids on Germany's second-largest city had already claimed the lives of 40,000 residents and destroyed more than half of the housing. However, when the formal surrender was to take place, two separate German delegations arrived at the British lines – one to surrender the city and the other to request an audience with Bernard Montgomery.

Dönitz was not part of the delegation – he deemed it beneath his dignity as Reich president to negotiate with a British field marshal. Instead, the delegation was led by Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg, who took over command of Germany's navy following Dönitz's promotion. Friedeburg set off in a battered Mercedes, wearing the long black leather coat and large cap typical of German admirals.

Dönitz's plan was for Friedeburg to attempt to strike a deal with the British so that the German evacuation from the east could continue. "Attempt to save the maximum number of German soldiers and Europeans from Bolshevism and enslavement. Army Group Vistula therefore to withdraw from the Anglo-Saxon zone."

The Germans were aware that Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union had agreed at Yalta that Germany had to surrender unconditionally to all three. Therefore, Friedeburg wasn't there to negotiate peace; instead, his mission was to attempt to drive a wedge into the enemy alliance with an offer that the German forces fighting against the Red Army were willing to surrender – to the British.

The two staff cars of the German delegation were escorted by British armoured vehicles, and the entire convoy headed towards Lüneburg, south of the Elbe, where Montgomery had set up his mobile headquarters on the Timeloberg heights.

Monty performs the role of his life

3rd May at 11:30, Lüneburg: As the German envoy approached, Field Marshal Montgomery devised his own plan to extract the maximum advantage from the meeting with the enemy. The seasoned desert fox had a sense of what the Germans were aiming for.

Friedeburg and his men arrived at Timeloberg and were left – somewhat bewildered – beneath a Union Jack flying over a few lorries. After several awkward minutes, one of the cabin doors opened, and a scruffily dressed figure appeared: Field Marshal Montgomery. The Germans jumped to attention, while the Briton leisurely descended the short steps, taking his time before returning their salute with a notably limp gesture.

Montgomery asked his staff: "Who are these people? What do they want?" in the same tone one might use for an unwelcome vacuum cleaner salesman. Of course, he already knew the answer, but the field marshall relished theatrics like this. After asking them individually, "Who are you?" he continued: "I have never heard of you."

The negotiation took place in the open air – to emphasise the British disdain. Friedeburg laid out the Germans' proposal: Army Group Vistula, with several hundred thousand men, was at that very moment retreating towards the British lines and was prepared to surrender to Montgomery.

"Certainly not!" The field marshal rejected the offer outright. "The armies concerned are fighting the Russians. If they surrender to anybody, it must be to the Russians. Nothing to do with me."

Instead, Montgomery made a counterproposal that the delegation surrender all German forces in Friesland, Heligoland and Schleswig-Holstein, and all forces in Denmark. "I added that, if he could not agree to this, and if Germany refused to surrender in these areas unconditionally, I would order the fighting to continue and many more German soldiers would be killed, and civilians too from artillery fire and air attack," he stated in his memoirs. A ▶

7th May 1945

PHOTOQUEST/GETTY IMAGES

Colonel General Alfred Jodl was flown to Reims to sign Germany's first unconditional surrender.

short distance away, a couple of officers watched the scene with amusement, Colonel Warren, Montgomery's Canadian liaison officer, whispered to Colonel Dawney that "the Chief was putting on a pretty good act". Dawney replied, "Shut up, you SOB. He has been rehearsing this all his life."

Before declaring it time for a good lunch, Montgomery conceded that he would "naturally take prisoner all German soldiers who come into my area with their hands up". As for civilians, he could promise nothing.

Friedeburg had to return to Dönitz to present the harsh terms. Travelling through British-held territory, the Germans were escorted, for safety, by a pair of British jeeps bearing large white flags, about twenty kilometres north of Hamburg, near the village of Quickborn.

The Germans had to choose between war and peace

3rd May, Flensburg, late morning: While Friedeburg was negotiating with Montgomery, Reich President Dönitz met with leaders from Denmark and Norway. Could Germany continue fighting?

Flensburg became Germany's capital after the fall of Berlin. Dönitz chose the city because it was as far as possible from Allied forces while still remaining on German soil. The government settled at the Naval Academy Mürwik, where Dönitz had begun his career as a naval officer in 1910. In one of the classrooms, he met with Germany's military and civilian leaders from the occupied countries of Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands to discuss the future.

In the Netherlands, the troops only controlled a strip of land on the North Sea. The British had cut them off from the rest of German territory. To meet with Dönitz, the local Reichskommissar Seyss-Inquart had to sail around the British. This was only possible with a fast Schnellboot (top speed 80 km/h).

Seyss-Inquart was more than willing to lay down arms. Similarly, the forces in Schleswig-Holstein had nearly exhausted their combat capacity and were eager to surrender. However, the German leaders from the north were far more belligerent. The Reich Commissioner for Norway, Josef Terboven, supported by the country's commanding general, was sure that in Norway they could withstand any attack. He commanded 380,000 well-equipped soldiers and saw no reason to end the war without a fight.

General Lindemann, who had come from Denmark, shared the same attitude. His 230,000 men were, admittedly, a pitiful collection of reluctant Hungarians, untrained teenagers, and older men. Yet Lindemann had a personal motive: he had been assigned to Denmark because Hitler had written him off as too old for active service – the general was eager to redeem his reputation.

Lindemann promised to "fight to the last man in an isolated Denmark". "But why, General?" asked one of Dönitz's ministers, with support from Werner Best, the Nazis' civilian governor in Denmark. Best pointed to the 240,000 German refugees in the country, who were dependent on the army's assistance and supplies.

The refugees' fate became the argument that convinced Dönitz of the necessity of a partial surrender to Montgomery: the German troops in the west would surrender so that fighting and evacuations in the east could continue.

Geisel
Kreis

By May, German resistance had effectively collapsed, but some units stubbornly fought on.

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Camera angles dictated the peace agreement

4th May, near Quickborn: British jeeps waited at the front line to meet Friedeburg. The small convoy drove towards Montgomery's headquarters.

In the British camp, a flurry of activity prevailed. Personnel prepared to receive the Germans. The rain had begun pouring steadily, so a tent was set up. This was where the field marshal would greet Friedeburg and his entourage.

The historic meeting was to be captured on film, but posed a technical challenge for the cameraman, because the tent measured only 6 x 6 metres. The camera had to be positioned outside, filming through a window opening. Lighting was also an issue. After considerable effort, the cameraman managed to procure arc lamps, illuminating the tent as effectively as any film set.

Montgomery watched the preparations and asked where he should stand. The cameraman pointed to a spot in the tent, prompting one of the staff officers to object: "The field marshall cannot do that, he must meet them." Montgomery was delighted. "Of course," he said, "they will come to me."

He then strolled over to the press tent, where war correspondents were waiting for a briefing. "Had a good tea?" Montgomery asked the reporters, before cheerfully continuing, clearly in high spirits, "Forces to be surrendered total over a million chaps. No so bad, a million chaps."

Shortly after, a staff officer appeared with the message that Friedeburg's delegation had arrived. "Tell them to wait," said Montgomery.

The war ended in north-west Germany

4th May at 18.00, Timeloberg: Just like the first time, Friedeburg and his delegation were made to wait under the British flag, this time in the rain.

Montgomery's meeting with the Allied correspondents lasted half an hour before the field marshal finally wrapped it up. "And now, we will attend the last act. These German officers have arrived back. We will go and see what their answer is."

Field Marshal Montgomery invited Admiral Friedeburg into his private office, set up in the cabin of one of the parked lorries. Here, the Briton ensured that the Germans truly intended to surrender. The answer was yes, and following that day's capitulation, they also wished to negotiate at a higher level – specifically with US General Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Western Europe.

Satisfied, Montgomery led the Germans into the tent where the camera and microphones were ready to capture the historic moment. The field marshal took his seat at the head of the table, and the German delegates sat down. Tense, one of them reached for a cigarette to calm his nerves, only to be stopped by a stern look from non-smoker Montgomery.

"We are gathered here today to…" the Briton began for the benefit of the camera, before reading the terms of capitulation aloud. The troops in the Netherlands, Denmark and north-west Germany were to surrender unconditionally the next morning at 08.00 British time. If the Germans refused to sign immediately, Montgomery warned that he would resume his attacks with renewed vigour.

One by one, the Germans were instructed to sign, with Admiral Friedeburg going first. The Germans were provided with the cheapest, most basic pen the British staff could find in the camp.

Midway through the signing, one of the powerful lamps above Friedeburg's head exploded, causing the admiral to leap from his chair. Eventually, however, all signatures were on the document. The surrender was a reality, and Montgomery had captured the entire event on film.

The German troops in Denmark, the Netherlands and north-west Germany were set to surrender on 5th May at 08.00 British Summer Time. Montgomery instructed that the original document, bearing the Germans' signatures, should be sent to Eisenhower. However, this never happened, because the self-assured Briton had no intention of relinquishing the evidence of the greatest moment of his life to a man whose job he had always considered himself better qualified for. Eisenhower would have to settle for a copy.

Threats forced the Germans to make peace

6th May at 21.00, Reims: Following the Germans' partial surrender the previous day, Nazi Germany had been reduced to Norway, parts of Czechoslovakia, and some encircled enclaves along the Baltic Sea and the French coast.

Friedeburg's delegation has arrived at General Dwight D Eisenhower's headquarters in the French town of Reims. The Allied Supreme Commander could not dream of camping under the open sky like Montgomery – he had set himself up in the town's technical college.

Before negotiations began, the atmosphere plummeted to freezing point as a group of American officers showed Friedeburg a report on the liberated concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. It contained images of piles of corpses and thousands of emaciated prisoners. Friedeburg became agitated. He insisted it couldn't be true that the Americans would tarnish his country and his honour as an officer!

Germany's total surrender was inevitable, but Friedeburg skilfully attempted to delay proceedings. The day before, he claimed that he was only authorised to negotiate, not to sign a surrender. This assertion bought the Germans an extra day, during which an increasingly irritated Eisenhower had to wait for new German representatives to be flown in from Flensburg. Now, General Alfred Jodl from the German High Command had finally arrived, but he, too, preferred to discuss anything other than a surrender that included the soldiers on the Eastern Front.

"It is clear that the Germans are trying to buy time. Their aim is to evacuate as many soldiers and civilians as possible from the Russian front towards our lines," Eisenhower noted bitterly.

To avoid provoking Stalin, Eisenhower didn't participate in the meetings, but his representatives kept him closely informed. Eisenhower was eager to secure a swift and comprehensive German surrender, as Stalin had long suspected the Western powers of conspiring with the Germans against the Soviet Union.

Finally, Jodl and Friedeburg presented an offer to sign an agreement on 8th May, but it would only take effect 48 hours later. This manoeuvre would give the Germans more than three extra days, but at this point, Eisenhower lost the last vestiges of his patience and resorted to outright coercion.

"Eisenhower insists that we sign today…" Jodl dejectedly reported back to Dönitz over the radio. If he declined, the Allied Air Forces would resume operations. "I see no alternative … I ask you to confirm immediately by radio that I have full powers to sign capitulation."

Within an hour, Jodl received authorisation to surrender. However, he and Friedeburg made one last attempt to delay, suggesting that hostilities cease only 48 hours after the signing of the surrender. This would enable them to create excuses for postponing the signing for as long as ▶

possible. Eisenhower saw through their ploy and responded that hostilities must cease within 48 hours from midnight, then fast approaching. Otherwise, he'd refuse to allow any Germans at the Western Allies' front lines. Friedeburg and Jodl had to accept that their stalling tactics didn't work.

The Germans agreed to lay down their arms at midnight on 9th May.

9th May 1945

AKG-IMAGES

Wilhelm Keitel, who had served as Hitler's submissive adviser throughout the war, signed in Berlin.

Surrender got an encore

8th May, Berlin: The Germans signed the total surrender with Eisenhower, but Stalin refused to recognise the agreement, demanding a new one in Berlin.

Everything was finally ready for the definitive German surrender. Friedeburg landed at Tempelhof Airport along with Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, the head of the German High Command – the highest-ranking German officer. Cars from the Red Army drove the Germans through the bombed-out ruins of Berlin, passing the Reich Chancellery, which lay in ruins. Only a few people were on the streets. Keitel later said that he was shaken to acknowledge the scale of the city's ruin.

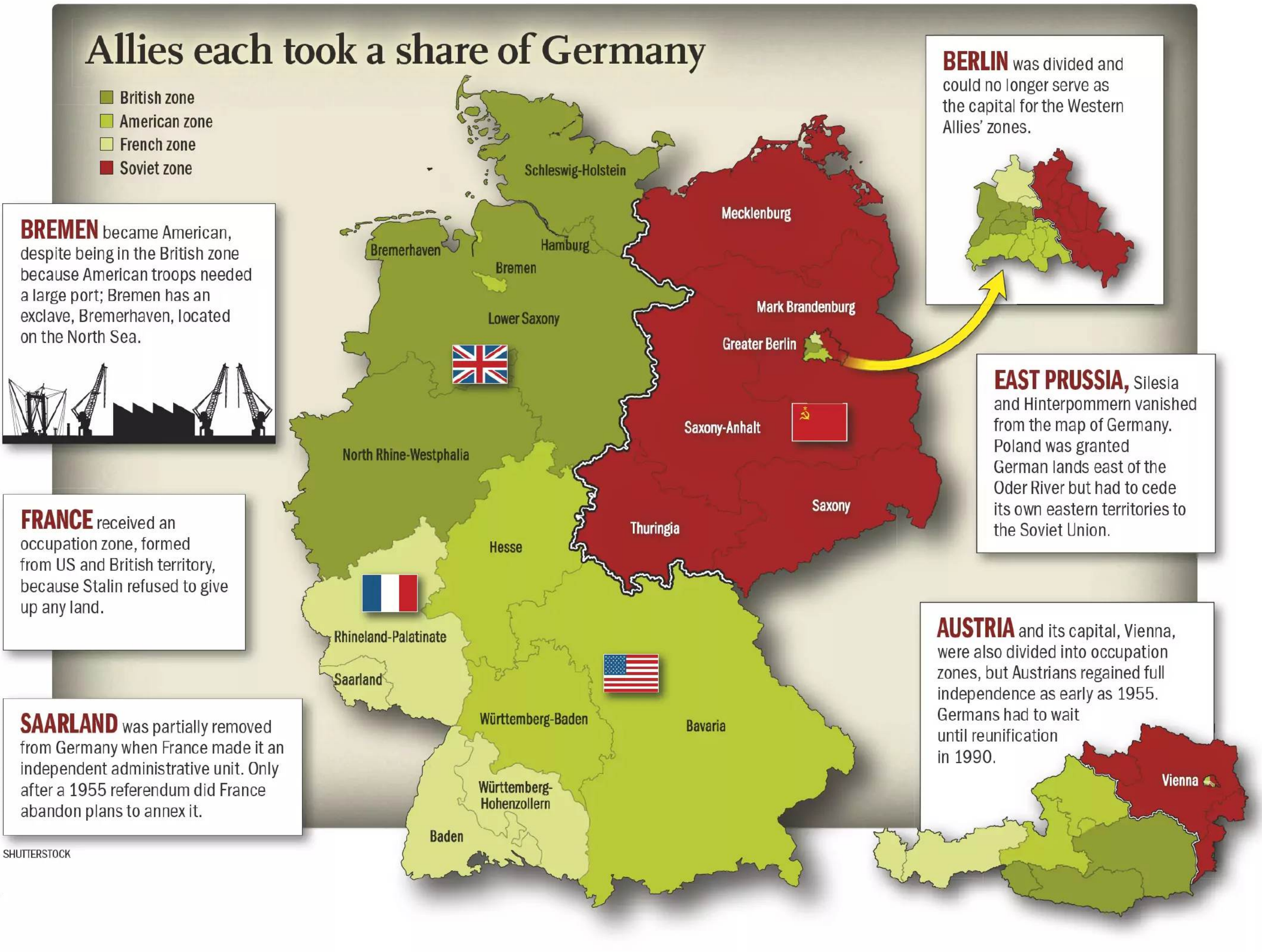
The cars stopped at the canteen of the military engineering school. The building was one of Berlin's very few intact structures. It was almost midnight, but the ceremony had to be postponed several times – among other reasons, because the French representative noticed that no French flag was flying alongside the Soviet, American and British flags.

In great haste, female Soviet soldiers stitched together a flag from a blue boiler suit, some white sheet fabric, and a strip of red cloth taken from a Nazi flag. In their rush, they accidentally placed the stripes horizontally – like the Dutch flag – and had to start again.

At last, the Allied representatives took their seats in the room. Eisenhower had sent a deputy, refusing to play a supporting role in a spectacle orchestrated by Stalin.

Field Marshal Keitel entered the room. He moved with Prussian arrogance, his face an expressionless mask, and snapped his heels together as he raised his marshal's baton in salute. "Ach, the French are here too!" the German muttered when he saw the French tricolour. "[T]hat's all we needed!" It grated on him to surrender to a country that the German army had steamrolled in 1940.

Keitel and his entourage were asked whether they'd read the document carefully, and were prepared to sign it. Keitel demanded more time to send word of the surrender to all German forces, but this was denied. He removed his



Allies each took a share of Germany

BERLIN was divided and could no longer serve as the capital for the Western Allies' zones.

BREMEN became American, despite being in the British zone because American troops needed a large port; Bremen has an exclave, Bremerhaven, located on the North Sea.

EAST PRUSSIA, Silesia and Hinterpommern vanished from the map of Germany. Poland was granted German lands east of the Oder River but had to cede its own eastern territories to the Soviet Union.

FRANCE received an occupation zone, formed from US and British territory, because Stalin refused to give up any land.

AUSTRIA and its capital, Vienna, were also divided into occupation zones, but Austrians regained full independence as early as 1955. Germans had to wait until reunification in 1990.

SAARLAND was partially removed from Germany when France made it an independent administrative unit. Only after a 1955 referendum did France abandon plans to annex it.

SHUTTERSTOCK

grey glove from his right hand, picked up the pen, and glanced contemptuously at the assembled journalists before signing the document. Next, the head of the Luftwaffe signed, and finally, Admiral Friedeburg signed as the navy's commander-in-chief. It was the third time he had surrendered.

By now, the clock had passed midnight, and it was 01.00 on 9th May. The war in Europe was definitively over.

Dönitz government continued

Flensburg, May: A defeated Germany clung to Dönitz's tiny realm at the naval academy, where his government held daily meetings.

A few days later, Friedeburg returned to Flensburg to brief Dönitz on the surrender in Berlin.

Life at Marineschule Mürwik continued almost as though nothing had happened. Each morning, Reich President Dönitz was awakened in his cabin aboard the South America steamer *Patria,* which had served as a residential ship in Flensburg since 1941. On the quay, his chauffeur waited with the armoured Mercedes 770 given to him by Hitler. The car drove him the 500 metres to the naval academy, where his ministers gathered in a classroom.

Dönitz's government was allowed to persist because it was useful in facilitating communication between the British and the remnants of the German state apparatus. The ministers, however, busied themselves with other matters – such as debating whether the Hitler salute should still be used in the German military and designing Germany's new flag. For now, the swastika still flew over the academy.

The minister of food had a special trusted role: supplying schnapps for the meetings. The alcohol kept spirits high, and the gathered men began to believe there might be a future purpose for them after all.

Naval academy was cleared

23rd May at 09.45, Flensburg: Time was running out for Dönitz and his government.

British soldiers demonstratively took positions around Marineschule Mürwik. All ministers, advisers and military personnel were gathered and arrested. Key figures such as Dönitz, Keitel and Jodl were sent on to Nuremberg, where the war crimes tribunal awaited them. Amid the chaos, Germany's former chief negotiator Friedeburg asked to use the toilet. Minutes passed, and the British soldiers grew uneasy. When they broke down the door, they found Friedeburg on the floor, his eyes wide open. He had poisoned himself with a cyanide capsule.

Friedeburg likely committed suicide because he found it a profound humiliation to surrender to the enemy – a fate chosen by one in five German admirals.

Postscript: *In Nuremberg, Dönitz maintained that he had acted as a military man and regretted nothing – he would do it all again. He was not held accountable for Nazism or the concentration camps, but he earned great respect for Operation Hannibal, which saved two million Germans.*

The war crimes tribunal in Nuremberg ran from 1945 to 1949.

DPA/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/SCANPIX RITZAU

KARL DÖNITZ

The admiral was convicted of crimes against peace and war crimes:

10 years in prison

HERMANN GÖRING

The air marshal was convicted of war crimes, crimes against peace and humanity, and for planning and waging an aggressive war:

Death penalty

RUDOLF HESS

Hitler's deputy was convicted of planning an aggressive war and crimes against peace:

Life imprisonment

Nazis were brought to trial in Nuremberg

International laws were insufficient to convict the Nazi criminals, so new laws had to be created before the trials.

CRIMES AGAINST PEACE This law targeted Nazis who had incited the German people to war during the 1920s and 1930s. Their propaganda promised to "bring Germans outside the borders back home to the Reich" and create "living space in the East" for German settlers.

PLANNING AND WAGING AGGRESSIVE WAR A number of countries were attacked by Nazi Germany without a declaration of war. The Allies sought to punish those responsible for assaults on neutral nations.

WAR CRIMES The Allies relied on the Geneva Conventions, which already outlined rules for warfare. The Germans had violated these laws, including by executing prisoners of war.

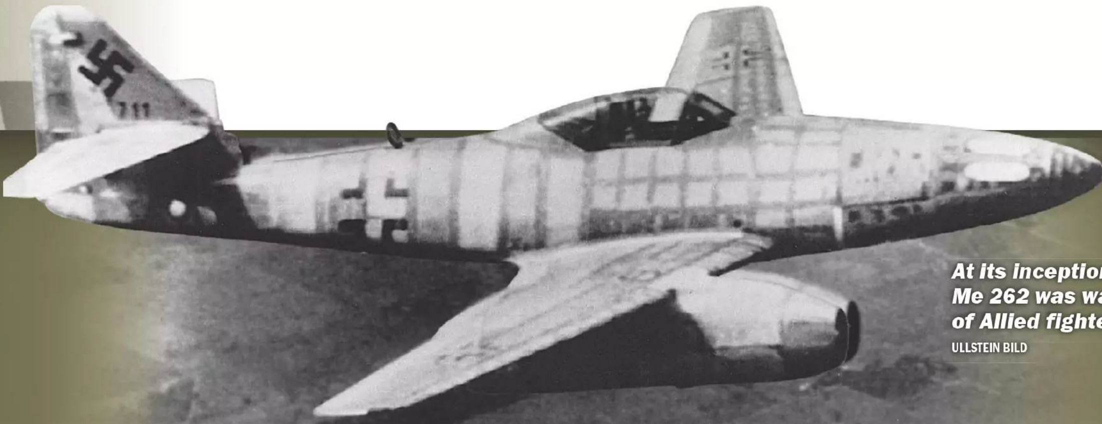
CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY The Nazis' brutal treatment of civilians in occupied territories fell under this charge. It included the deportation of civilians, mass executions and, most notably, the extermination of Jews and other groups.

HITLER'S 10 biggest blunders

The Allies did not win the war because they were the strongest force, but because Hitler was a hopeless military strategist. In fact, the Führer made so many foolish decisions that the US and British generals often called Hitler their best ally.

BY MARTIN LANDIN

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX, SHUTTERSTOCK & GETTY IMAGES



At its inception, the Me 262 was way ahead of Allied fighter jets.

ULLSTEIN BILD

10 Used advanced jet fighters as bog-standard bombers

Hitler had a superior fighter in the Messerschmitt Me 262, but despite expert advice to the contrary, he insisted on using it as a bomber.

The Messerschmitt Me 262 was ahead of its time in many ways, not least because it was the first fighter in history to benefit from jet engines. With a length of just 10.6 m and a top speed of 900 km/h, the German-developed jet could out-manoeuvre the best Allied fighters of the period. In short, the Me 262 was just what the Luftwaffe needed in 1943 when the war was about to turn in the Allies' favour.

Impressed with the German-engineered prototype, Hitler ordered the lightning-fast aircraft into production – as a bomber. The developers protested that their wonder machine was wasted dropping bombs, but Hitler insisted. The result was a disaster. Even under controlled conditions, the German pilots missed their targets by around a mile because the Me 262 was simply too fast for the pilots to accurately calculate the bomb's drop point.

By the time Hitler sent the planes into battle as fighter jets in 1944, the Germans had already lost the war.

HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★☆☆☆

Had the Me 262 been used as a fighter aircraft in 1943, the Germans could have taken control of European airspace.

SPITFIRE WAS OUTCLASSED

	MESSERSCHMITT ME 262	SPITFIRE MK VB
Type:	Fighter	Fighter
Engine:	2 x Junkers B-1-turbojet	1 x Rolls-Royce Merlin 45
Top speed:	900 km/h	595 km/h
Range:	1,050 km	805 km
Ceiling:	11,450 m	11,125 m
Rate of climb:	1,200 m/min	792 m/min

British civilians paid dearly for Hitler's desire for revenge bombings.

TOPFOTO/POLFOTO

9 Gave the Royal Air Force time to recover

In June 1940, Hitler ordered an air offensive to prepare the way for an invasion of Britain. The Luftwaffe set about destroying the RAF's ability to resist. In a series of highly effective strikes, the Germans bombed command centres, fuel stores, aircraft factories and runways. In August 1940, the Luftwaffe was well on the way to achieving its goal – until Hitler interfered.

During an attack on a military target, a Luftwaffe bomber strayed off target and accidentally dropped its payload over central London. The British bombed Berlin in response. Furious, Hitler had the Luftwaffe begin a prolonged campaign of bombing British cities. This gave the RAF much-needed respite that eventually enabled its pilots to gain air supremacy over the British Isles.

HOW BIG AN ERROR?

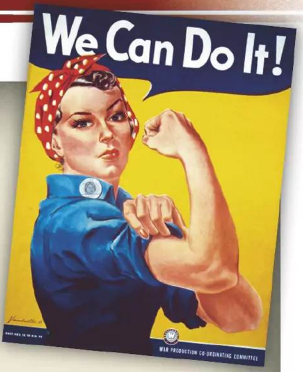
★★★☆☆

The Battle of Britain was Hitler's first defeat and gave the Brits faith that victory was possible.

8 Kept German women out of factories

While millions of Allied women in helped keep their countries' industries going during the war, Hitler believed that women were unsuitable for factory work. Instead, they were expected to concentrate on caring for their homes and children. The Führer's conservative outlook led to a huge labour shortage at German factories when men were called to the front line. Hitler tried to keep his industry going with forced labour, but that only replaced 20 percent of the lost workforce. As the war progressed and resources dwindled still further, Hitler permitted a small number of German women to contribute to the war effort by becoming telephone operators, nurses and secretaries. Others joined the workforce as SS guards in concentration camps.

HOW BIG AN ERROR?
★★★☆☆
Allowing women to work wouldn't have helped Germany win, but it could have delayed its defeat.



In the US, special posters encouraged women to work to help the war effort.
AKG IMAGES

7 Tied his own air force's hands

On the night of 31 May 1942, the RAF sent around 1,000 bombers into Germany under the cover of darkness. The Luftwaffe were unable to detect the enemy aircraft at night and the RAF destroyed 13,000 buildings in Cologne on the first night alone.

The British continued to attack in this way for months – until German fighter planes began to hit the bombers as they landed at British airfields. This countermeasure worked beautifully, then Hitler stuck his nose in. He cancelled the successful ambushes and instead ordered that enemy aircraft be targeted over Germany, so that his people could take heart from seeing the British planes being shot down.

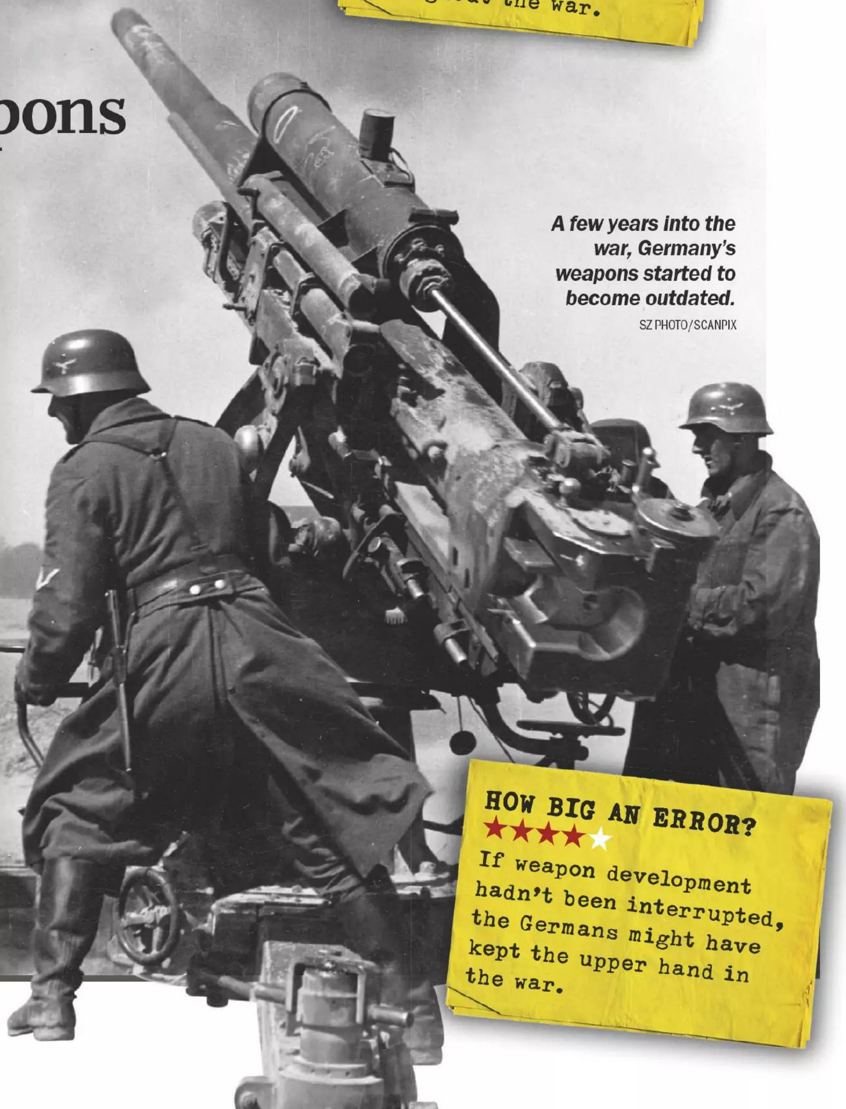
HOW BIG AN ERROR?
★★★☆☆
Hitler's nonsensical order allowed the British to bomb Germany throughout the war.

6 Went to war with old weapons

Hitler's confidence in his own abilities as a military strategist was cemented in the first years of the war. The annexation of Austria, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the campaign in Poland, the lightning occupations of Denmark and Norway and the surrender of France in 1940 merely confirmed what Hitler had known all along: he was a tactical genius who knew better than his overly cautious command staff.

Buoyed by his early military successes – most of which were due to the enemy's hesitancy and ill-prepared armies – Hitler cancelled almost all German weapon programmes. The war could be won with existing weapons, Hitler insisted. But then the war really got going, and two years later the Nazis' weapons were becoming outdated in comparison to the enemy's.

Hitler ordered weapon development to resume, but two years had been lost and several key designers had died in the interim. Although the Germans still manufactured some groundbreaking weapons, none were produced in sufficient numbers – and those that did come into use suffered a host of teething troubles.



A few years into the war, Germany's weapons started to become outdated.
SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX

HOW BIG AN ERROR?
★★★★☆
If weapon development hadn't been interrupted, the Germans might have kept the upper hand in the war.

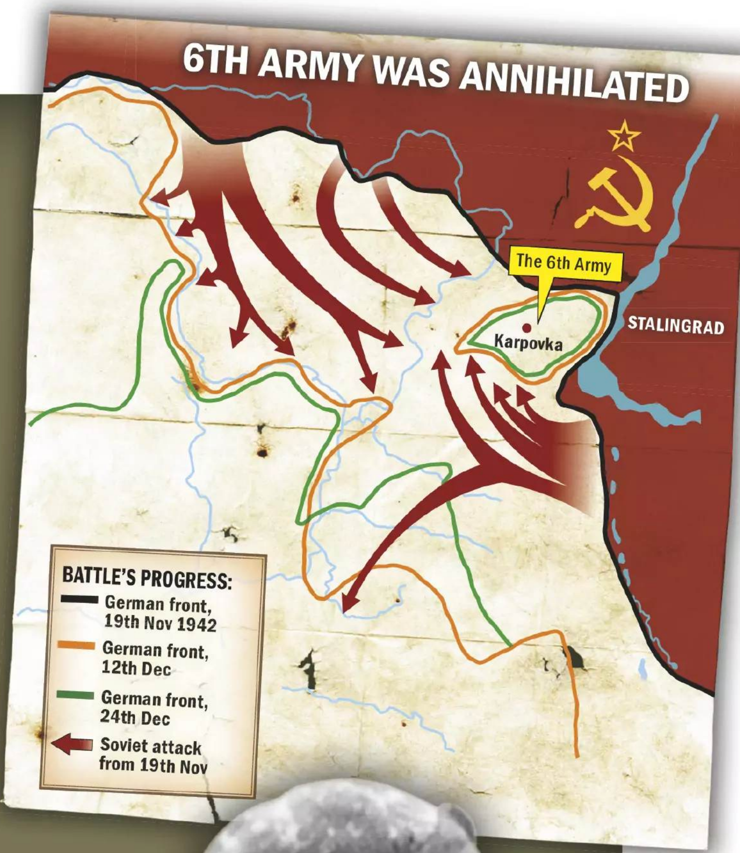
5 Refused to give up Stalingrad

German generals pleaded to make a tactical retreat from Stalingrad, but the Führer insisted they stay.

In December 1941, the German invasion of the Soviet Union had stalled, and Hitler gradually began to fear a repeat of Napoleon's disastrous defeat at Moscow in 1812. In order to force matters, he appointed himself commander-in-chief of the army.

A few days later, Hitler issued an order for the German troops to stand firm at all costs – despite several of his most experienced generals proving on several occasions that a tactical retreat could lead to victory when facing a numerically superior enemy. Typically, such retreats could swiftly be turned into counterattacks once the chasing enemy's supply lines became too thinly stretched.

The standing order cost tens of thousands of German soldiers their lives, but Hitler firmly believed that his soldiers could win victory through sheer force of will. Half a year later, Hitler had still not learned from his mistake and once again refused to allow troops to fall back during the 6th Army's attempt to occupy Stalingrad (now Volgograd). Hitler told his generals to hold their position despite them warning him that they were in danger of being encircled and overrun. He didn't listen. The 6th Army thus had the dubious honour of becoming the first German army to be surrounded and completely annihilated. The fighting at Stalingrad cost the Germans more than 180,000 men.



Russian troops annihilated the German 6th Army at Stalingrad.

AKG/SCANPIX & GETTY IMAGES

HOW BIG AN ERROR?

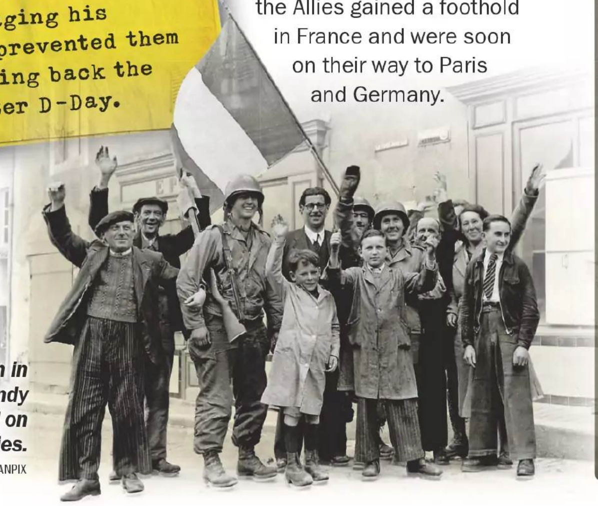
★★★★★

Hitler's irrational order to stand firm destroyed the German army's main advantage: mobility.

4 Waiting for an invasion that was already underway

At dawn on 6th June 1944, Allied aircraft bombed German defences in Normandy and tens of thousands of Allied soldiers waded ashore. While one of history's greatest invasions was underway, Hitler was at home sleeping. He didn't wake until 14.00 – even though he had known that an invasion was imminent. Hitler was convinced the D-Day landings were just a diversionary move. For weeks, Hitler failed to send reinforcements to Normandy because he was waiting for the real invasion. In the meantime, the Allies gained a foothold in France and were soon on their way to Paris and Germany.

HOW BIG AN ERROR?
★★★★☆
Hitler's insistence on micromanaging his generals prevented them from driving back the enemy after D-Day.



The French in Normandy cheered on the Allies.

AGE/SCANPIX

HOW BIG AN ERROR?
★★★★★
Without the Dunkirk veterans, the war would most likely have been over for the Brits.

365,000 British soldiers were evacuated across the English Channel because Hitler hesitated.

M.EVANS/SCANPIX

3 Failed to obliterate the British Army at Dunkirk

In May 1940, German tanks and soldiers stormed across the border and through the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France. In just ten days, Hitler's armoured units had reached the English Channel, pushing the British army into a corner of the coastal town of Dunkirk. Nazi General Ewald von Kleist, who was a few kilometres away with three armoured and two infantry divisions, believed that Dunkirk could be captured in less than a day. Then, suddenly, Hitler ordered all German units to halt. With the German war machine on pause, the British were able to conduct a large-scale evacuation. After nine days it was over: 365,000 soldiers had escaped across the Channel and Hitler lost the chance to wipe out the British army.

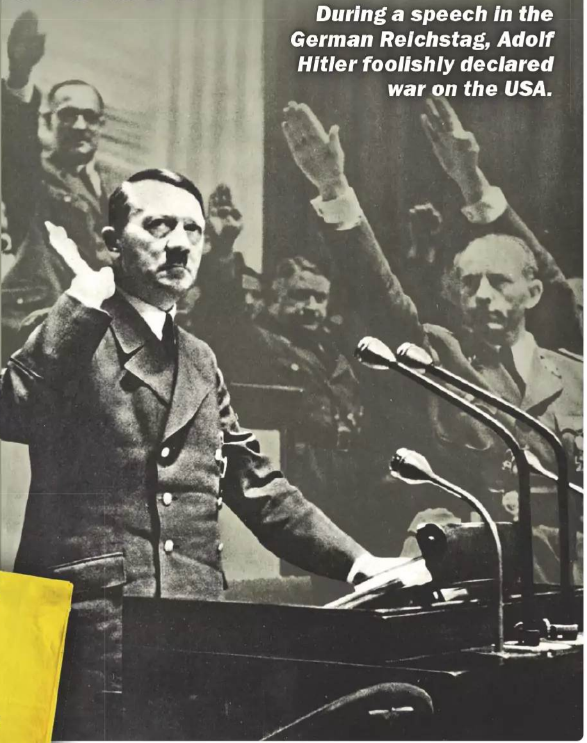
2 Declared war on the USA

The day after Japan's attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Ambassador Hiroshi Oshima eagerly tried to persuade Reichsminister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop to declare war on the United States, but von Ribbentrop hesitated. The minister believed that entering into a war with the US would be suicidal for Germany.

Hitler disagreed. The Führer considered Japan as an invincible ally – and once the Empire had defeated the United States, it could turn its attention on the Soviet Union. Then Stalin would be forced to fight on two fronts, and with the Soviet troops more thinly spread, Hitler would be able to capture Moscow with ease.

Three days later, Hitler made a declaration of war against the United States, fully expecting that most US forces would be deployed against the Japanese. To Hitler's surprise, President Franklin D Roosevelt sent most of his troops to Europe.

Even worse for Hitler, the troops Stalin had been holding in reserve to fight off any attack from Japan were now available to fight the Germans.



During a speech in the German Reichstag, Adolf Hitler foolishly declared war on the USA.

AKG/SCANPIX

HOW BIG AN ERROR?
★★★★★
If he hadn't declared war, Hitler could have avoided fighting the US for two or three years.

Invaded Russia in summer uniforms

The invasion of the Soviet Union – the largest in history – would be over in a few months, Hitler thought. He was wrong.

1

"We only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down," Hitler said before invading the Soviet Union in June 1941. His neighbour had a larger army, but the Germans were better organised and had more experienced officers. Hitler's disdain for the Soviets led him to believe the invasion would be over in a matter of months.

Initially, the invasion went well: the Soviets were surprised by Hitler's attack. Five Soviet armies and over 2,000 aircraft were destroyed in the first week alone. But after four weeks, German supplies were exhausted, and the lightning invasion ground to a halt.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, Hitler refused his generals' advice to send troops directly to Moscow – a hub for Red Army supplies. Despite their protests, Hitler insisted on splitting his forces and launching an attack towards the Caucasus oil fields and the resource-rich Ukraine and Baltic states.

This meant that the Nazis only reached Moscow in December 1941 – just in time for the infamous Russian winter to paralyse their troops who were still wearing their summer uniforms. The German quartermasters had not planned for a icy campaign in Russia and therefore did not have enough winter uniforms to help their men survive the extreme temperatures, which often dipped to -30 degrees Celsius.

Hitler's arrogant dismissal of both the Red Army and the Russian winter was a decisive factor in the war turning against the Axis powers. After their defeat in the Soviet Union, the war was truly lost for the Nazis.

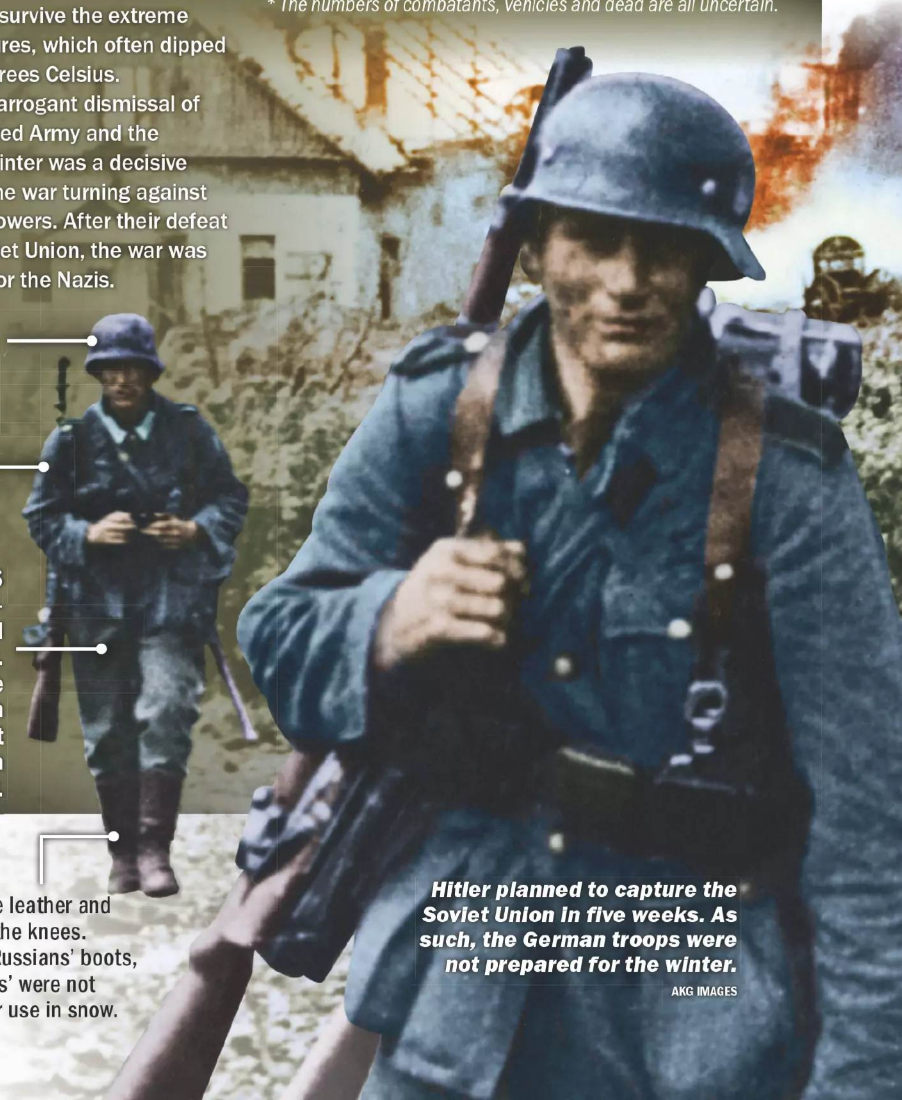
M EVANS/SCANPIX

German soldiers had to be inventive to survive the biting Russian cold.

INVASION OF THE SOVIET UNION

	GERMANY	SOVIET UNION
Soldiers*	3,800,000	5,500,000
Tanks	4,300	15-25,000
Aircraft	4,389	11,357
Artillery	7,200	34,700
Horses	750,000	Unknown
Dead	> 800,000	> 4,000,000
Wounded	> 600,000	Unknown

* *The numbers of combatants, vehicles and dead are all uncertain.*



STEEL HELMET protected a soldier's head during the fighting, but provided no protection against the cold.

JACKET was made of wool and was extremely durable – but not very warm in winter.

TROUSERS were high-waisted and made of wool. They were quite practical in summer, but useless in winter.

BOOTS were leather and went up to the knees. Unlike the Russians' boots, the Germans' were not intended for use in snow.

Hitler planned to capture the Soviet Union in five weeks. As such, the German troops were not prepared for the winter.

AKG IMAGES

HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★

The invasion might have been over before winter set in if Hitler had listened to his generals.

THE ENDGAME

Editor-in-chief: Ann Qvist
Publishing Director: Elisabeth Halmø
Cover: Sara Hougaard Bagge
Production: Eva L Strandmose

Translators: Nick Peers, Katharine Davies, Michele Turner, Toni Baxter

Bringing History to Life is published by:
Bonnier Publications International AS,
PB 543, 1411 Kolbotn, Norway.

Marketing/Distribution UK:
Marketforce (UK),
121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London W2 6QA
0330 390 6464 | Hello@Marketforce.co.uk

Licensing and Syndication:
Regina Erak – regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk
Tel: +44 (0)7753 811622

Printed by: Poligrafijas Grupa Mukusala, Latvia
ISSN: 2445-6659

All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner or form is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher. Whilst every care is taken with the material submitted to this bookazine, no responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage. Whilst every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders, the sources of some pictures that may be used are varied and, in many cases, obscure.

The publisher is happy to make good in future editions any error or omissions brought to their attention. The publication of any quotes or illustrations for which authorisation has not been given is unintentional.

BONNIER
Publications International

NORDIC SWAN ECOLABEL
Printed matter
3041 0876

Cover credits: Historical/Getty Images, Alamy/Imageselect/Vintage_Space, Berliner Verlag/Archive/Imageselect, Walter Frentz, Shutterstock

While Hitler cowered in his bunker…

Air raids, hunger and fear of the Soviets characterised life in Berlin during the last winter of the war. Few believed the Nazis' assurances of victory, but no one rebelled. Disaster loomed for the Third Reich; victory awaited the Allies. And with the prospect of Hitler's downfall, the lust for power flared up among the Führer's potential successors.
Follow the final phase of World War II. From the battles of Montecassino, D-Day, Arnhem and the Ardennes to the attacks on German Dresden and Seelower Höhen, followed by the final, desperate battle for Berlin.

BONNIER
Publications International